THE OLD COUNTESS

JANE DOUGLAS SEDGWICK

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By Anne Douglas Sedgwick

THE OLD COUNTESS
THE NEST
A FOUNTAIN SEALED
FRANKLIN WINSLOW KANE
THE LITTLE FRENCH GIRL
ADRIENNE TONER
CHRISTMAS ROSES
THE THIRD WINDOW
TANTE
A CHILDHOOD IN BRITTANY

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON AND NEW YORK

THE OLD COUNTESS

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BY

ANNE DOUGLAS SEDGWICK
(Mrs. Basil de Sélincourt)

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THE OLD COUNTESS

THE OLD COUNTESS

CHAPTER I

The Old Countess

'YOU are an artist, Monsieur?'

Graham raised his eyes from his canvas and saw an old lady standing in the mountain-path beside him: gloomy, unresponsive eyes they were, and they did not soften for her; yet as he replied, 'I try to be,' they remained fixed upon her; for she was a surprising apparition.

Against the blue autumnal sky it was a Goya she made him think of; festive and sinister with her black ribbons and laces, her pallid, painted face and great owl-like eyes. She leaned, witch-like, on an ebony stick, and a broad hat, edged with lace, was tied, from beneath the brim, under her chin. Blue, black, sallow-white; in colour and design the picture of her was wonderful; and her eyes were wonderful; so old, yet so living and liquid; one iris half veiled by a piteous droop of the eyelid.

Graham continued to gaze at her, noting further that, though stately, she was frayed and almost dingy; her black kid boot gaped at the ankle where a button

lacked and the laces at her wrist were tattered. She was so old that she might, in youth, have been a beauty of the Second Empire, with fan and wreath and crinoline, among satin upholstery and gilded *consoles;* yet that she was still susceptible to male attention was made evident to him by the faintly provocative smile that hovered on her lips.

'You have made it very menacing,' she now remarked.

Her eyes were on him; his painting, he saw, was a mere pretext; yet she must have looked at it, and pretty carefully, before addressing him, for such a comment, from an old lady of the Second Empire, showed discernment.

'Menacing? What do you mean by that?' he questioned. He remained seated, mannerlessly enough; and he looked away from her to his picture, and then out over the majestic spaces of sky and cliff and river. Perched high as they were on the precipitous hillside, it was also against the sky that the old lady saw him, and she might well divine that when he looked at the landscape he forgot her.

Richard Graham was admirably handsome. The modelling of his brows and eyelids was Napoleonic and something also in the folded, ironic melancholy of his lips, his cold and brooding aspect; but his face showed no further Latin subtleties, and his rough, dark locks, short but ample nose, broad irises and powerful throat, gave to his head, in certain attitudes, a look of Robert Burns. He wore exceedingly well-cut

coat and trousers of thin grey homespun; a white silk shirt; blue socks; blue silk handkerchief, and sleeve-links of flat gold; — on all of which details the old lady's eyes rested, successively and with an almost passionate attention. His demeanour was that of an artist, but his dress that of a man of fashion.

'To analyse a menace is difficult, is it not?' she said, as he cast his dark glance again upon her. 'Your sky is blue; it is full of sunlight; yet it is a tragic sky.'

'I always feel the sky in France rather tragic,' said Graham. 'It seems to relegate us; to have no use for us; none of the complicity that one feels in our caressing English skies.'

'Ah; I thought you English — though your French is so excellent. — An English artist who prefers to paint France rather than his own country. *Bien*,' the old lady smiled. Her smile drew her drooping lid still lower; and her front teeth, still beautiful, though set in cavernous darkness, lent it a certain pathos. 'Perhaps that is what I felt in your picture. It relegates us. And not only its sky. Your very river is merciless. — Though indeed one does not expect mercy from a great river such as our Dordogne.'

'It's marvellous,' said Graham, gazing again before him. It was. He never recovered from the shock of splendour each seeing of it brought. Winding in majesty between its vast grey cliffs, its wooded gorges, it was to the earth what an eagle is to the sky; a presence; a power; possessing what encompasses it.

The old lady recalled his gaze. 'And it can be mer-

ciless indeed. During the years that I have lived here I have seen three inundations. Corpses have rolled upon its flood.'

'Corpses? Really?' Graham laughed a little, looking up at her. She was probably a romancing old lady and the quality went with something meretricious he felt in her voice, dulcetly, beautifully as that enshrined her perfect French. It went with the Second Empire tradition, too, this evocation of swollen tides and helpless, livid forms; a poem by Victor Hugo; a picture by Géricault. 'Why didn't they get out of the way?'

'Ah, you do not know the force and fury of our great rivers when they are unchained by spring among the mountains. They can, suddenly, resistlessly, sweep all before them. They are, in that, like our French nation, led by a Napoleon. My maternal grandfather was one of Napoleon's marshals. We are of plebeian blood on my mother's side; but I think I am prouder of that soldier of fortune than of my crusading ancestors. — You fought in our great war, Monsieur?'

'Yes; I fought,' said Graham, amused. Something in her tone, slightly resentful perhaps of his incredulity and lightness, implied that it had been a privilege to fight for the France that Napoleon fought for, and to claim the war, the victory, as France's alone.

The old lady was silent for a moment, leaning on her stick.

'It's all to the good — your sweeping everything before you — as long as you don't wreck things, isn't it,' said Graham, and though he spoke kindly he was

beginning to wish that she would move on. This wonderful French light enveloped the landscape like an incantation; but it was October; the days were getting short; it would change if they went on talking too long.

'You are staying at our little Buissac, Monsieur?' asked the old lady. She must guess that he wanted to go on painting; but she could not, yet, he felt, bring herself to leave him.

'Only for a week. We are on our way South.'

'You are not alone?'

'My wife is with me.'

'She, also, is an artist?'

'Far from it.' Graham smiled a little, streaking a tentative colour on his palette.

'She has other occupations while you paint?'

'She's fond of motoring. She's probably scouring the country at this moment.' Graham laid on his colour.

'It is a wild, a desolate country for a young woman to venture far afield in. You do not fear for her?'

'Fear for Jill!' Graham laughed. 'She went through the war, too. She drove an ambulance in the firing line most of the time. The Dordogne isn't likely to frighten her after that.' He looked up at the old lady — 'May I bring her to see you one day before we go? I should like to go on talking; — but not now.'

The old lady seemed for a moment arrested by this suggestion, and her young man's casual, kindly tone showed her that, if not unaware of convention, he was at all events entirely indifferent to it. But her surprise

was untouched by displeasure. Her smile, on the contrary, betrayed delight, a delight that wreathed itself in graciousness. 'I shall be most charmed to receive you. Come any day you please and you will find me waiting for you with a cup of tea; and it will be a cup of real tea, and at the proper time,' she smiled, 'though I, myself, from long seclusion, have lapsed into the habits of the province. I dine at midday, sup at dusk, and go to bed with the birds; — a sad existence, is it not, for a Parisienne?'

'That's all right, then,' said Graham. 'We'll come at tea-time. And where are we to come? And whom are we to ask for?'

'You must ask for the comtesse de Lamouderie; at the Manoir; — anyone will direct you. — It is down there I live; — beyond Buissac; beyond the cemetery; in the midst of the chestnut forest. A road leads up from the *grande route*. I am afraid it is in terrible disrepair; your car could never attempt it. But it is not far. You could come on foot.'

'If you can get as far as this — I think we certainly can!' laughed Graham. 'And what about you? Do you feel it safe to wander about the country by yourself?' He had risen in farewell and doffed his hat.

'Oh, I!' the old lady laughed bitterly. 'There are no dangers where I am concerned. I ceased to be a woman many years ago.'

This, to Graham's Anglo-Saxon ears, was a piece of information as unexpected as it was unnecessary. He

ignored it. 'You might break your leg, you know. You might meet a robber. — Well, *au revoir*.'

'I have nothing to be robbed of, as you see.' The old lady opened her arms and displayed her ancient attire. 'I am a scarecrow. And if a dead scarecrow is found one day on a mountain-path — well, I should prefer that, to tell the truth, to holy water and holy oil and all the lugubrious paraphernalia of a deathbed.'

'I agree with you! I should too,' said Graham. Their dark eyes dwelt on each other for a moment. Something passed between them. He did not think he liked the old lady, but a smouldering ember of recklessness, ruthlessness, perhaps, looked out at him from her eyes and his own dark fires answered it. 'Don't die in the mountain-path till we meet again,' he said.

It was comical, pitiful, he reflected, after she had left him, to remember how the Second Empire glance had answered this final sally: a glance arch, triumphant. He had delighted her; enraptured her. Poor old creature. She was ravenously lonely.

CHAPTER II

Jill

BUISSAC lay along the banks of the great river, hardly more than a thin scattering of houses; the inn, with its cheerful garlanding of vines, at one end, a villa or two at the other. Halfway up the cliff a monstrous modern Mairie, with pompous wings and preposterous cupola, all but obliterated the Romanesque church, ancient, patient, tranquil, its dark carved porch whispering legends terrible or gentle, a mushroom-like clustering of chapels about its apse. The Mairie, Graham thought, as he descended into the village at sunset, looked like a blustering bully pushing an old nun into the gutter, and a sardonic smile curled his lip as he glanced up at the *Liberté — Egalité — Fraternité*, carved in challenging golden letters above its portals. He and Jill had already come into disdainful contact with some of the furtive officials who lurked within its airless chambers.

Higher still, on the wooded summits, a ruined mediæval castle was poised like a falcon against the sky. Predatory falcon or hypocritical bully, which, he wondered, was the more malevolent presence. Though indeed the turbulent history of France, symbolized by castle and Mairie, had, he imagined, affected the remote, self-sufficing life of the little community rather as the seasons affected it; as much and as little. The

level of the demand on life in such a place had always been so low that existence crept on, tranquilly, laboriously, throughout the centuries, unchanged by changing dynasties. That was the secret of happy living Graham reflected; to keep the level of demand low. On the level of Buissac life might be said to justify itself.

In front of the Ecu d'Or, on the wall that ran above the river, a young woman, dressed in mushroom-coloured silk, was lounging, a young woman with her hands in her pockets, a cigarette between her lips, an air of infinite if indolent good-humour, and Graham, as he saw her, felt her to be a further exemplification of happy living; for Jill's demand on life was certainly low in the sense that it was very simple. Yet the mystery of Jill was that anyone so rudimentary should seem to possess so much. Sitting there on her background of golden river and golden sky, unaware of appraisals, unconscious of æsthetic significances, the splendid evening permeated her, and she was a part of it all in a sense that the passionate yet impersonal attitude of the artist could never sink to — or attain. It seemed to belong to her as much as she to it.

She sat, as he approached her, not moving, and keeping her oddly smiling eyes upon him. Jill's very eyebrows partook of her smile; they drooped from their broad, quizzical lift over the bridge of her nose and the corners of her eyes drooped with them, while the corners of her mouth curled up. This gaiety of demeanour had in it no touch of coquetry or challenge;

it was, rather, that of a school-boy, and of an English school-boy; for Jill was as English as a hawthorn hedge in May.

Her sunburned skin was almost as dark in tone as her tawny hair; but by nature it was fresh and pale. She had been motoring all day and her small, prominent nose was slightly blistered by the hot wind, and her small lips parched, so that she looked more than ever like a hardy boy. But it was so he liked best to see her.

He sat down on the wall beside her and felt, again, his old pleasure in her looks. It never failed him; just as her pleasure in his, he imagined, never failed her. It was with each other's looks that they had fallen in love five years ago, towards the end of the war, and he liked Jill's as well now as when he had first seen her, sitting above him, against a war-ravaged sky, in her ambulance lorry. Poor old Jill could hardly have foreseen that in the gallant, blood-stained young officer who had won her heart, almost without asking for it, she was to find nothing but a moody, incomprehensible artist. She was a girl to marry a soldier; not a girl to marry an artist; whereas he was as content with Jill now as he had been then; and asked nothing more from her.

Loyal, kind, unselfish, there was something endlessly dependable about her, something that made him think of her, in their relation, as riding a restive, cherished horse and saying: 'Steady, old boy; steady.' She had never had to say it explicitly; had perhaps never been

aware of a need for holding him up; yet he knew that but for Jill's imperturbable confidence he might have fallen more than once into the disorders of his morose and rebellious youth.

'Any luck?' she asked him now, and it was characteristic of her to put his artistic activities in the category of sport. She would feel towards his canvas as towards a good basket of trout.

'Yes. Excellent. This country surpasses everything. Where have you been?'

'Oh, for miles; over the mountains. There are tablelands up there with endless birch-woods on them. And I found a great blue lake. But nothing's better than this. Nothing could be better than that river.'

From the river wall they gazed down the golden flood to where, beyond a beetling, wooded promontory, dark against the sunset, it turned in a vast curve and seemed to brood across the golden plains. Opposite Buissac the shores were less steep and russet vineyards climbed, from ledge to ledge of quiet hillside, above another hamlet, its evening cries faintly wafted.

At the turn of the river the promontory ran a long foot out into the stream, a green peninsula, its poplars shimmering against the sky. They could see that cattle grazed there, three cream-coloured cows, half dissolved in light, moving among the poplar groves.

'It's all so gentle; yet it's almost dreadful, too,' Jill murmured.

'Dreadful? How do you mean?'

'That great, dark cliff, hanging over everything like

that; and everything being so vast; so much more than one can possibly need,' Jill said vaguely. 'Dreadful in a splendid way, of course. Terrible is a better word, perhaps.'

'Everything beautiful is more than one needs, my funny Jill. That's a definition of beauty, perhaps. Except that it's what one needs more than anything.'

'Yes. That's true,' Jill nodded. And her young face, its jocund lines wrested to gravity, took on a sudden strangeness.

An old peasant woman, wearing the austere black dress of the locality, passed along the dusty road, knitting as she led her flock of gaunt, disconsolate sheep.

'The only trouble with the place is the animals,' said Jill, following the sheep with her eyes. 'They all look half starved.'

'That old creature looks half starved herself,' said Graham. 'And by the way, I'm going to take you to tea with another old woman, and I shouldn't be surprised if she were half starved, too. I feel as if we ought to bring our bread and butter with us.'

'How did you pick up anyone in these parts who has tea? — There'll be boiled milk with it, I wager you.'

'She's an old countess, and she lives just beyond that promontory, I gather, for I think I make out chestnut forests on it. She appeared while I was painting and only asked to stay and talk all day. Rather beautiful; rather direful. I never saw anything like her. I only got rid of her at last by telling her I'd come to tea and bring you with me. If you ask me, I

think she fell in love with me at first sight. It was a *coup de foudre.*'

'Poor old girl! I don't blame her. I did, too,' laughed Jill, perhaps a trifle ruefully.

So they sat on till it was time to get ready for dinner, watched from the open windows of the Ecu d'Or by Monsieur and Madame Michon, by Camille the garçon, and by Amélie the maid-of-all-work, who was, Jill remarked, when she appeared once or twice at the door to wring out a *torchon* or sweep a heap of dust into the road, as gaunt as the sheep, and as unbeautiful.

Jill and Graham fulfilled the French tradition of the charming and eccentric English couple travelling unaccountably, light-heartedly, erratically through a country not their own. It was felt by Monsieur and Madame, by Camille and by Amélie, that there was no telling how long they would stay or how soon depart; it depended on nothing predictable, though in hopes of the happier possibility, Madame was roasting a fine fat duck for their dinner and Amélie saw to it that the English insatiability in regard to hot water was met by a steaming *broc* carried up to their rooms. They had come in a small, open car, yet Madame last night at dinner had worn pearls and Monsieur had an impressive set of toilet articles. They would, everybody felt it, be generous with tips and not critical of bills; and that they knew what they were eating, quite as well as if they had been French and not English, Monsieur Michon had observed when he himself waited on them.

That night when they sat, with coffee and cigarettes,

on the balcony that overlooked the river, Monsieur Michon ventured to ask them if they were pleased with Buissac, and they said that they were very pleased.

'Is it over there that the comtesse de Lamouderie lives?' Graham asked, pointing towards the promontory.

'Madame la comtesse? *Mais oui*, Monsieur.' Monsieur Michon could not conceal his surprise. 'Monsieur knows Madame la comtesse?'

'I met her this afternoon. She lives at the Manoir, she told me, in chestnut woods.'

'Yes, but it is a rough road. Monsieur will not get the car to go up it.'

'So she said. One follows the highroad and turns off.'

'You cannot miss it, Monsieur. One turns off at the cemetery *à mi-route*. And one has a fine view of the river on the way. We seldom see Madame la comtesse here in Buissac; but once a year she appears at High Mass; so I am told,' Monsieur Michon added with discretion, proving himself to be with the Mairie against the Church. 'She is an eccentric old lady.'

'And do you have great floods here at Buissac?' Graham asked, idly interested in verifying his old friend's histories.

'Ah, not now, Monsieur. This is not the season.' Monsieur Michon was evidently alarmed lest a reputation for floods should make Buissac less attractive.

'No; not now. But in the spring. Are people often drowned?'

'Drowned, Monsieur?' Monsieur Michon spoke

with repudiation. 'No one has been drowned at Buissac; — except a cow here and there. We have great floods; in the spring-time, in some years. But we know how to deal with them and no life is in danger.'

'No corpses, eh?' smiled Graham. 'They don't go floating down the current?'

'*Mais non; mais non.*' Monsieur Michon smiled indulgently now, perceiving his guest's humour. 'We do not deal in corpses here.'

CHAPTER III

The Cemetery

'IT'S a day like a fairy-tale,' said Jill.

'A happy fairy-tale or a sad one?' Graham asked.

They were on their way to the Manoir, the green, lustrous glades of the chestnut forest opening before them as they climbed the mild ascent that led up from the river level. It was a beautiful walk, as Monsieur Michon had said, and the cool, sunny afternoon lay like a benediction over the splendid country.

'A happy one, of course,' said Jill. She turned her smiling eyes upon her husband, thinking that he looked a fitting hero to any fairy-tale. She was happy to be doing anything with Dick. So often she was alone; though Jill was seldom conscious of feeling lonely.

'Some fairy-tales are sinister, you know,' Graham objected. 'Perhaps if you'd seen the old lady you would feel that this one would be. She's rather witch-like and one can imagine her running a long needle into the princess's heart more easily, I'm afraid, than waving the wand for Cinderella.'

'But when princesses have the needles run into their hearts they come to life all right in the end,' said optimistic Jill. 'Fairy-tales may be sinister, but they always end well. I wasn't thinking so much of your old lady, though. It was just the feeling of starting on an adventure, with you. And everything being dif-

ferent from anything we've ever done before. It all feels different to-day.'

'Nice child,' Graham smiled at her. Jill's fundamental trust in life often amused and often touched him.

Halfway up the shoulder of the cliff the *grande route* swept suddenly to the left, on level ground, while, on the right, the ascent continued, more steeply, by a narrow, stony road.

'This must be the way she told me of,' said Graham. 'And it's quite true that one wouldn't care to take the car up it.'

But Jill had stopped short and was staring at a high wall that ran along the *grande route*.

Above it, bristling against the background of forest green, was an extraordinary array of what looked like nothing in the world so much as large tin tubs turned upside down and mounted on stilts. There were myriads of them; and amidst the quietly rustling solitudes they had a grisly look.

'What in Heaven's name is that?' said Jill.

'This,' said Graham, after a silent survey, 'is evidently the cemetery. Charming, isn't it?' He was less startled than Jill; perhaps because he was by nature more acquiescent in the grisly.

'The cemetery? Why?'

'Ask me another. We must go in and see.'

'I haven't the least wish to go in. — Are they baths?'

'Not at all. And few of those who repose beneath them ever, I imagine, knew a bath. They are temples.

Shrines. Come along. It's rather picturesque. A variant on Velasquez's *Las Lanzas*.'

Reluctantly Jill followed him round to the high *grille* which yielded to his thrust.

They found themselves in a gravelled, orderly necropolis, a *Galerie Lafayette*, a *Bon Marché* of death. It seemed almost to display counters and to advertise good worth for the money. The poorer graves were sheltered by the high-perched tin tabernacles; the more opulent by stone chapels, railed across the front and displaying with sociable complacency their funereal altars, tablets, photographs, bead-wreaths, and vases filled with artificial flowers. There were streets of them, standing face to face. Some were solid and some were flimsy, but they all expressed the conviction that they were doing the right thing in the right way.

'It's like the gentleman with a ribbon across his chest who gets up, in evening clothes, and in broad daylight, at a French function, to make a speech,' Graham observed, sardonically gratified by a new experience. 'It civilizes death, you see, Jill; classifies it and introduces it to society. The tubs look industrial rather than rural, and are an invention, I expect, of the people who work in the quarries down the river.'

'I never imagined anything so horrible,' said Jill, standing to look from side to side with a dismay almost indignant. 'It will haunt my dreams.'

The cemetery was not all reclaimed from nature and dedicated to horror. In one corner — Jill observed it from where she stood — a broad space of grass still

grew green and thick and the chestnut branches, over the wall, dropped their russet fruits upon it. She moved away, drawn towards this oasis.

There, against the wall, she saw another grave; different from all the rest. It was marked only by a heave of sod and by the simplest headstone; and, deep in the grass, the chestnut branches sweeping low above it, it had a solitary yet cradled look. Graham joined her as she stood beside it.

At the head three glass vases held sprays of autumn roses; faded, yet with a lingering colour; and a wreath of heather at the foot was still fresh. *Marthe Ludérac* was the name upon the stone, and above it: *Priez pour elle*. The dates showed that she had died six years before.

Jill and Graham stood, strangely silenced.

'Why is she all alone like this?' Jill whispered. 'She has gone as far away from the others as she could.'

'She shows her taste in that,' said Graham. 'But she was forty. Not young. We can't make a romance about her.'

'No; not a romance. But a tragedy, perhaps,' said Jill. 'I have a feeling that she was dreadfully unhappy.'

'Most people are, my dear. Even the people over there, under their tin tubs, suffered, you may be sure.'

'I have a feeling that she suffered differently,' said Jill. 'It's because she suffered differently that she's here, quite by herself; with no family about her.'

'She was a stranger in the place, perhaps.'

'Perhaps. But someone who lives here must have

put the flowers. Marthe Ludérac. It's an unhappy name, I think.'

'I think it's rather a heroic name. Rather a cruel, strange name, too. It's gentle; and sword-like. Marthe Ludérac,' Graham repeated, while, in the calm sunlight, the chestnut branches rustled softly, over them and over the grave. 'A Marthe Ludérac might have been a provincial Royalist and fought against the Republican bands. She might have been drowned in the river down there — in a *noyade;* she might have been guillotined. It's a name to make history out of; there's a sound in it of disaster, and beauty.'

'But things like that couldn't have happened to this Marthe Ludérac,' the literal Jill objected. 'She died only six years ago.'

'Yes. She did. And she makes me uncomfortable. As you say, she was unhappy. Come; let's go away from her.'

They turned from the grave and retraced their steps, in silence, to the *grille.*

Now they took the road that led up among the chestnuts, for the *grande route* left the forest at the cemetery wall and swept in a noble curve round the promontory, far above the river. But in this narrow, stony track the trees grew closely overhead, and deep gullies, worn by the rains, ran on either side under crumbling banks of moss. Another turn showed them the forest, still climbing, while, on their left, the steep hillside dropped away, towards the river, in ledge after ledge of scantily growing vineyard. A dilapidated

thatched cottage stood among the vineyards and a rough mountain-path led down from it and disappeared over the edge of rock. On their right they saw a copse of dark sycamores and rising above them were the chimneys of the Manoir.

The sycamores must have been planted about it some fifty years before and had not liked their situation, for they all grew sadly and grudgingly, pressed closely together and spreading, on tall grey stems, a roof of disconsolate green that shut out the sky. The Manoir stood behind high plastered walls, and when they passed through the gate, that clanged a loud bell at their passage, they found themselves before the saddest house.

It was long and low and damp and sombre, with two rows of windows looking out at the sycamores and a tiled roof dark with moss and lichen. Green stains ran down over the ochre-coloured walls and in the flower plots before it were only pale, degenerate Michælmas-daisies. One might have thought it uninhabited but for the barking of a dog. He stumbled round a corner of the house, old and half blind, and retreated precipitately on seeing them standing there. But at an upper window a head that Graham recognized appeared. It was quickly withdrawn and a voice was heard calling shrilly: '*Joseph! Joseph! On sonne! Dépêchez-vous!*'

The voice descended, still calling, and running steps clattered and shuffled within as they stood before the door from which the paint had long since peeled and

blistered. '*Le thé! Le thé!*' called the voice in tones tragically imperative. '*Et n'oubliez pas le lait!*'

Then, after an interval of silence, the door was slowly opened, and an old man, derelict, nondescript, morose, appeared in the doorway. He showed no sign of the excitement that reigned within and looked at them with an unmoved if unhostile gravity.

'*Madame la comtesse est chez elle?*' Jill inquired. After the sadness of the cemetery, she felt this scene restoring. It made her want to laugh and reminded her of 'Alice' and the frog gardener.

'*Mais oui, mais oui,*' he answered, as one who knew, with her, that the fact was self-evident; and, standing back to let them enter, '*Entrez donc, Monsieur et dame.*'

He wore a tattered grey linen jacket, black-and-white checked trousers, black felt slippers, and, oddest touch, a frayed white tie very correctly placed. His face was sunken yet swollen, with folded lips and small bright eyes; his spare hair, combed carefully forward over his baldness, was still almost black, and he looked like an ancient though respectable rat emerging from a drain.

The hall they entered was high and empty. It was lighted by a glass door, through which one could see the apple-trees of a *jardin potager*, and by a tall window placed over the stairs. A faded, vast, pretentious battle-piece hung on a wall.

Joseph threw open a door and announced in impartial tones: '*Madame la comtesse descendra tout de suite.*'

The drawing-room in which Graham and Jill found themselves was unlike any room that they had ever seen before. It was so chill and pale and formal that it seemed as far from life as the cemetery had been; further, even, for the cemetery commemorated past life while this room seemed full only of the memory of a past where no life had ever been. Yet, long and spacious, the northern light shining in from four windows upon its polished floors, a frieze of pallid water-lilies running round its dim green walls, it had the charm of a perfect consistency. Two sofas, symmetrically placed, and a dozen stiff carved chairs were upholstered in grey satin sprigged with green and purple. On a round mahogany table, its one leg hideously carved, stood a stereopticon with its box of photographs, a casket of ebony inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and a large gilt cage where a grey parrot, a bit of apple in his claw, paused from the act of eating to look at them with sideways head. There were accurately placed bookcases of carved ebony holding books bound in black and red, and round the walls hung a series of faintly tinted landscapes painted in water-colour and framed in gilt.

Graham looked about him, intently, while Jill's eyes turned to the battered *bergère* and small attendant table that stood near the fireplace. A dog-eared novel, a paper-knife, and a pair of spectacles lay on the table and beside them was a bowl of common kitchen-ware with a spoon in it. This had contained, Jill felt sure, the old lady's luncheon, and so human, so helpless, was

the avowal of age and infirmity, poverty and loneliness, that the fireside group affected her as a voice speaking in the silence might have done; a voice speaking piteously.

From the *bergère* and the bowl she looked up at the marble mantelpiece. Above it a gilt mirror, reaching to the cornice, reflected all the light of the room, and on it stood a tall gilt clock, slowly ticking, two candelabra and two glass vases filled with sprays of fading autumn roses. As she saw them Jill's heart stood still.

She could not trace, for the moment of distress and mystery, the memory that so affected her. Then it came sharply. They were the same roses as those on Marthe Ludérac's grave, and arranged, surely, by the same hand. It must have been Madame de Lamouderie who had placed them there. She must have known Marthe Ludérac; and been fond of her; and sorry for her. And upon this background of mystery and pity and fidelity, as the door opened and the old lady entered, Jill first saw her.

CHAPTER IV

The Derelicts

MADAME DE LAMOUDERIE wore her frayed and rusty black; but her hair had been hastily dressed under a black lace mantilla and instead of battered boots she wore high-heeled satin shoes. Her old lips were rouged, her old cheek smeared with white, and she advanced towards them, her ebony stick in her hand, with a very majestic manner.

Jill gazed at her; amazed; arrested. She was trying to see her as the friend of Marthe Ludérac and finding it difficult. It was Graham who guessed at the burning excitement that devoured her ancient heart and who interpreted the kindling of her eyes as they rested upon Jill. Her interest in art — he had seen it from the first — was as rudimentary as Jill's own; she had expected to see in his wife, perhaps, a raw, untempered young bohemian; and in Jill she recognized at once a denizen of the world; of the only world she cared about. She had not been able to place him; but Jill she placed at once, and her manner as she took her in, took in her mushroom-coloured silk, her hat and gloves and shoes, her air, burnished, finished, nonchalant, and kindly, became at once less majestic and more effusive; even a little too effusive. She greeted them; she begged them to be seated; and, smiling upon Jill, whom her great eyes continued to devour and to

appraise, she said: 'I must apologize to you, Madame, for the hovel in which you find me. I am very poor — disastrously poor — and I have found what refuge I could.'

'But I don't call this a hovel,' said Jill, looking thoughtfully at her; she was still occupied with her sense of difficult reconstruction. 'I call it rather grand. We live in hotels, usually, and have no real home at all.'

'This is a hotel to me. This is not my home. I rent it, merely, from a landlady who is also in summer my housekeeper, and who has just gone away — to Bordeaux; otherwise you would find me in a better state for welcoming you.' The old lady's eyes, as she spoke, fell on the kitchen bowl and she promptly picked it up and placed it out of sight on the other side of her chair. 'I spend my winter quite alone here, but for my *maître d'hôtel* and a peasant woman who comes in to care for me.'

'This isn't your own setting, then,' said Graham; and Madame de Lamouderie's eyes left Jill to dwell on him with overt delight. 'I thought it all went with you.'

'*Mais non; mais non*,' said the old lady, correcting his ingenuous error almost tenderly. 'If you knew France better you would recognize in this the setting of the enriched *petite bourgeoisie* as it climbs towards the *haute*. My own home, in childhood, was one of the most princely *châteaux* of Normandy, and for many years, in Paris, my salon was celebrated for its splen-

dour and beauty. I am not even of this province; although, on my father's side, we are related, many centuries ago, to the de la Mothe Fénelons.'

'Now I'm very sorry for that,' Graham smiled at the old lady, and Jill, looking at them both, felt again a sense of pity; 'for I thought that you belonged to that mountain-path with the vineyards beneath you and the menacing sky above. — Do you remember that you found my landscape menacing? — Nothing in Normandy is menacing; and that's what goes with your type, I assure you. I'd have liked to paint you there; or, if not there, then in this room, with the parrot in his cage beside you and your black lace mantilla. But if you disown it all like this, it leaves me without my picture.'

Jill felt sorrier than ever for Madame de Lamouderie as her great eyes endeavoured, almost tragically, to follow the significance of words so unexpected to her.

'Dick is only joking,' she assured her. 'He'd like to paint you anywhere.' And Jill spoke with conviction, for even she could see that the old lady was like a Goya.

'It's quite true!' Graham laughed. 'Though I'm not a portrait painter.'

Madame de Lamouderie looked from one to the other. As deeply as she had been disconcerted by the cruel suggestion that she had herself destroyed a possibility so marvellous, so was she now deeply relieved. She looked at Jill with gratitude and she smiled at Graham her half-provocative and half-supplicating

smile: '*Vous êtes charmants tous les deux*,' she assured them. 'But who could think of painting an ancient harridan like myself when he has before him a Hebe like the one I see. Madame, you are the true *tête de keepsake* type.'

Again Graham dropped his slow 'Ha-ha.' Graham's laugh was a singularly ungregarious affair. It did not take you into his confidence; it excluded you, rather, from all participation with the sources of his mirth. 'You don't know what you are talking about,' he told the poor old lady. 'The *tête de keepsake* has sloping shoulders and ringlets and a rosebud mouth. Why are French people always four or five generations behind the English period? — You still read Byron, I suppose, and imagine English life like the life in Dickens. Jill isn't interesting æsthetically; but she's not as bad as a *tête de keepsake*,' said the dispassionate husband, while Madame de Lamouderie's attention remained riveted upon him; 'Reynolds might have painted her, or Romney. But she isn't interesting in design or colour; while you are.'

Madame de Lamouderie glanced almost timidly at Jill as this preference was announced; but Jill was laughing.

'It's quite true. Artists, real ones, like Dick, never care to paint me. Only one ever did, and that was on a horse, and he did it because of the horse, not because of me: I went well with it. Character is what they like, you know, and I haven't any character.'

'But then, do they prefer a mummy to a beautiful

young woman?' asked Madame de Lamouderie, and, still laughing, Jill said that perhaps they did. She herself was quite satisfied to have no character if it preserved her from looking like some of the ladies whom Dick's friends chose to paint.

Joseph at this point appeared with the tea-tray, very accurately disposed, with milk in its jug and a plate of *petits beurres*. The old lady's hands trembled as she poured out the tea and, observing the unexpected viands, the parrot, after watching her for a moment, burst forth with a short refrain, half croaked, half chanted:

> '*Quand je bois du vin clairet*
> *Tout tourne, tout tourne — au cabaret!*'

'*What* a lamb!' cried Jill, leaning round in her chair to gaze delightedly at him.

'Ah, he is a very clever bird, very clever indeed; he has said that verse ever since I knew him, and it is only when he sees food,' said Madame de Lamouderie, pleased by this appreciation of her pet. '*Oui, oui, mon Coco, tu suras du thé.* — A little biscuit soaked in milk will enchant him.'

'Oh, may I give it to him?' said Jill. 'He's too attractive. And I do adore animals.'

'And so do I,' said the old lady, preparing the little sop for Coco, who continued to watch her closely, his head on one side. 'So do I. They are my only remaining joy. Here, Madame; give it to him. He will take it so prettily in his claw.' And as Madame de La-

mouderie handed her the saucer, still with a trembling hand, Jill felt that though she might be rather dreadful — and she felt her rather dreadful — there was something loveable about her.

'But do you mean it? Do you really mean that you would like to paint my portrait?' said the old lady, while Jill fed Coco, scrap by scrap, through the bars of his cage. 'In my youth — at a time when you would have found me uninteresting in colour and design, Monsieur — the greatest artists of Europe disputed the privilege of painting me; but those days are long, long passed.'

'I'll come back and paint you in the spring,' said Graham.

'Oh — the spring! I shall not last till then.'

'Yes; yes, you will; you will last till spring for my sake,' said Graham, casting his glance of gloomy mirth upon her; and Jill saw that the poor old creature was bewildered by her felicity.

'But why spring?' she urged. 'Why do you go, just when I have found you both? It is our most beautiful season here, this month of October.'

'We're going south, worse luck,' said Graham. 'I had pneumonia last spring and Jill insists that I must have a winter on the Riviera.'

'Ah! I envy you. It is a paradise.'

'Not to me. I know it too well. I used to stay there when I was a boy with my mother.'

'He means that he doesn't find it interesting in colour or design,' Jill explained. 'This is the country Dick loves to paint.'

'And is it in England you live?' asked the old lady. 'You are recently married? You have children?'

'Married for five years; and no children,' said Jill. Children would not have done at all in her and Dick's life. 'We live in England when we live anywhere. Dick has a studio in London and we have three rooms over it. If you call this a hovel, I don't know what you would call our studio. They put the milk on the stair outside our door in the morning.'

'But you were not born in a studio with three rooms over it,' said the old lady, smiling caressingly upon her. 'You were born — shall I tell you?, for I see it plainly — in one of your great, beautiful English country-seats with park and deer and village of retainers such as we read of — not only in Sir Walter' — and Madame de Lamouderie flashed a glance at Graham — 'but in later writers, too. You have hunted the fox; you have been presented at Court; you have danced at great balls with the *noblesse* of your land.'

Jill was again laughing. 'Well, I have danced at a few balls; but the war put an end to most of those for me; and I've been presented at Court; and I certainly have hunted the fox; — that was a clever guess; — there's nothing I love so much. But all the rest is wrong; as wrong as can be,' Jill assured her, her jocund eyes upon her. 'No park; no deer; no retainers at all. Only a very small, very humdrum country-house: — I loved it, of course; because it was my home; — but it was quite ordinary and humdrum all the same.'

'Was? Is it yours no longer?'

'No; my father's dead now and my brother couldn't keep it up and sold it,' said Jill in a matter-of-fact tone. 'I haven't hunted for three years. I do get a mount now and then — when I go back.'

'It was I who put an end to it all for her,' said Graham. 'She'd be living in the country now and hunting and dancing with the *noblesse* if it weren't for me. You have before you an English romance. The beautiful young English heroine who falls in love with the needy painter and follows him to the studio where the milk is put outside on the stair in the morning. It's quite true, you know,' and Graham glanced affectionately at Jill as he spoke. 'She made as bad a match as possible in marrying me.'

The old lady gazed upon them, perplexed and rapturous. 'It was a *mariage d'amour*. And you have remained in love for five years. Do you realize that it is a rare feat that you have accomplished?'

'We find it a most normal occupation,' smiled Graham. 'But to change the subject — which Jill finds rather embarrassing — tell us about this room where you say you don't belong, but where you make such a subject for a painter. What sort of people do belong, then? Who put it all together and who lived here?'

'People of no consequence at all,' said Madame de Lamouderie, looking about her with a rather grim expression. 'A family called, *tout simplement*, Jacquard. A few generations back they were nothing but local peasants and they rose to be traders in Bordeaux.'

'But great French marshals began as plebeians

sometimes; so I've been told on good authority,' Graham reminded her with his smile.

'Ah — so they may have started; — but they did not end as *boutiquiers!*' the old lady took up his challenge with equal gaiety. She was living. She was taking in draughts of life deeper than any she had tasted for years. She hugged the happy moment to her breast.

'It doesn't look like the room of what we should call *boutiquiers*.'

'Ah, our bourgeoisie gains taste in time; — if you call this taste. — Do you admire those water-lilies? — those bookcases? — and — bon Dieu! — those horrible books that were never read and never meant to be read by anybody? — And the Jacquards did not remain Jacquard undiluted. They married well; too well. It was their ambition that undid them. Impecunious daughters of the *haute bourgeoisie* — of the *petite noblesse*, even, on one occasion — stooped to the alliance, and few families can bear the burden of a succession of dowerless wives. You would not admire this room, Monsieur' — and again a certain vindictiveness came into the old lady's voice — 'if you had to spend your winters in it alone.'

'I think it's rather horrible, too,' said Jill. 'It looks like a room that's never breathed. How do you keep warm? It's a northern aspect, isn't it?'

'It is a northern aspect. I do not keep warm. I perish with cold!' cried Madame de Lamouderie. 'Fortunately — or unfortunately — I am tough; *so-*

lide. Branches are cut from the trees for my fire here, and sometimes I crouch over an oil stove, and sometimes, even, take refuge with Joseph in the kitchen. Oh, it is a miserable existence in the winter! But there are the animals. My landlady is fond of animals, and they are companions for me. A dog; a cat; a hare; all originally unfortunates; wounded, trapped, pursued; she finds them by an unerring instinct; even Coco was dying of a skin disease in a dirty shop in Bordeaux. We have cured him of that, and you see how intelligent he is. And I have books. — Not those. — She sends me books from Bordeaux. I devour them; romances, biographies, travels. So the time passes and in the spring she returns. Then it is not so bad. I have somebody to talk to.'

'And don't your southern windows look over the garden?' said Jill, always interested in aspects and utilities. 'May we see your garden before we go? The door at the end of the hall leads out, doesn't it?'

'Ah, it is nothing, the garden — nothing; but it has the southern aspect, that is true; and our bedrooms look over it; we preferred that to the larger, colder rooms on this side of the house. They are kept closed. They are haunted, I always feel. I never enter them. But you will not go so soon?'

'It's getting rather late. I'm afraid we must. You will see us again in the spring.' Jill was very sorry for the old lady and something in Graham's detached and smiling demeanour seemed to her a little inhuman. But Dick often struck her as rather inhuman. She

determined that he should not be allowed to forget his promise about the portrait.

Madame de Lamouderie rose from her chair and took her stick. But she did not really need a stick, Jill observed. Though so old she was surprisingly upright and she moved forward on her high heels with a beautiful ease and majesty.

Graham looked about them as they went; he was more interested in the Manoir than in his old friend. 'That window up there is oddly placed,' he said, at the foot of the stair. 'It reminds me of a window in a Méryon.'

'It is a very difficult window to clean,' said the old lady. 'Almost impossible, as you will recognize. Joseph has to mount a ladder from the landing.' She opened the glass door and the sunny stretch of the garden was before them, a straight path, running between gnarled fruit-trees, from where they stood, to a bench placed against the wall at its farthest end. It was melancholy, meditative; yet not unhappy; it was too well tended for that, as Jill's practised eye recognized at once. The ancient trees were pruned; the borders dug; the autumn flowers that grew on either hand looked like the flowers of fifty years ago, but their soil was carefully weeded. Over the high walls was the chestnut forest. 'I should spend all my time in this garden if I lived here!' Jill exclaimed.

Graham stood looking about him, suddenly silent; and something brooding, remote, desolate, even, in his expression struck upon Jill with the sense of

mystery that dear, familiar Dick at times roused in her. It was, she thought, as if he were a changeling and heard the distant carolling of a strange ancestry: — the fairy-tale, again. But everything to-day was fairy-tale, and she did not know now whether she could so confidently have told Dick that it was a happy one. There was something very strange in the still, sunny garden; in the still, black form of the old lady, there beside her; in Dick standing a little apart and gazing up the garden path as if he expected to see someone walking down it towards him.

'And here is another pet, you see,' said Madame de Lamouderie, pointing with her stick at a commodious hutch that stood in the sun against the house. 'Our hare; he has lost a leg; but he is quite tame, like Coco, and comes to one's call. — Yes; it is not bad, the garden; not bad. But it is too much for one woman and an old man like Joseph.'

'Does she work in the garden? Is she young, your landlady?' asked Jill, looking down at the old hare, who, stretched at full length against the sunny wall, was dozing, head back, with an air of heraldic dignity. 'I like her for taking care of so many unhappy creatures. I imagined her an old lady.'

'Like me?' Madame de Lamouderie leaned on her stick and shook her head, smiling. 'No, we are not all old here. Marthe is till young.'

'Marthe? Is her name Marthe?'

'Yes; her mother was a Jacquard,' said Madame de Lamouderie; 'but her name is Marthe Ludérac.'

CHAPTER V

Jill and Graham

'IT must have been her mother, then,' said Jill.

They had walked for some time in silence. They had passed the cemetery and were on the descent of the *grande route* among the lower ledges of the chestnut forest, and her mind had all the while been full of Marthe Ludérac.

'Whose mother?' asked Graham.

'The landlady's mother. Her name is the same. Didn't you hear?'

'The same as whose? No; I didn't.'

'As the grave's. Of course. That is it. The roses were the same and she's only been gone a few days.'

'My dear, what are you talking about?' Graham inquired, roused from his reverie and with a mild exasperation.

'I can't help feeling it all very queer. Didn't you notice — you seemed to notice everything, Dick; — I never saw you stare so; — on the mantelpiece in that dismal room? — They were the same roses, arranged in just the same way, as those on Marthe Ludérac's grave. I saw them at once and thought she must have been a friend of Madame de Lamouderie's and that Madame de Lamouderie must be rather a dear to keep flowers on her grave like that. And just now, when I realized that her landlady was young and asked her

name, she said: Marthe Ludérac. You must own it's queer.'

Dick listened, but rather vaguely. 'I can see nothing queer about it. Why shouldn't the daughter put roses on her mother's grave — and on the mantelpiece as well? It's the natural thing to do if you have a dead mother — and roses; — and a mantelpiece. What of it, Jill?'

'I don't know. I only feel it a little creepy. The grave all alone like that; and the dismal house, and the one-eyed, one-legged animals, and that poor old woman with her princely *châteaux* and porridge-bowl.'

At this Graham began to laugh and looked at his wife as he had not looked at her since they had entered the Manoir. It was as if her preoccupation exorcised his own. He linked his arm in hers. 'Go on, Jill. Tell me some more. I like to see your imagination having a run; it runs so seldom — sane creature that you are. — Now I've not been seeing people at all. I've been seeing that tranced room — the colour of sea-water; those stairs with the high, uncanny window over them; that garden that remembers — and waits; — in its sleep; for it went to sleep fifty years ago.'

'Oh, Dick; — you *are* a treasure! — to see it all like that — and make me see it, too. Yes, of course; I was feeling it down at the bottom of my mind; only it was all, with me, a background for the people; for Marthe Ludérac and the old lady. You're quite right. It's a *coup de foudre.* She's dreadfully in love with you, and

I was afraid she was going to cry as she clung to your hand like that just now when we left her. She's afraid she won't see you again, of course; but she shall; she shall,' said Jill, fumbling for her cigarettes, since Dick had her by the arm, and getting out her matches.

'You wouldn't mind coming back? I don't know, really, about the old lady; it needs a Goya and a Manet rolled in one to do her with the parrot beside her; but I could go on painting this country for the rest of my life.'

'Well, I shouldn't like to spend the rest of my life here, I confess,' said Jill. 'But I do want you to come back and keep your promise. I want to see Marthe Ludérac, too. And she'll be here in the spring. She's young and sad and kind; rather a wonderful person, I feel. And Madame de Lamouderie feels a little glum about her. I wonder why. Perhaps because of the *noblesse* blood that she doesn't think a Jacquard has a right to. Perhaps it was because of the *noblesse* blood that the mother didn't care to be mixed up with the gravel and the tin tubs and moved into the grass — and almost into the chestnut forest.'

'Perhaps it was. Pretty good, Jill. But the old lady interested me more than the young one, and she doesn't interest me much except for her looks.'

'Oh, you must be kind to her! You mustn't flirt with her and lead her on and then not really care.'

'She knows I'm ragging her.'

'She's afraid you are, but hopes you're not. There's something one does like in her, Dick, in spite of the

boasting and flattery; something endearing. The way she smiled at Coco and looked at the hare.'

'I don't dislike her. I feel as if I understood her; better than you could ever do, Jill — for I am somewhat devilish too, while you belong to the angelic category — better than she does herself. If she were twenty I'd probably fall in love with her. She's that kind of woman. She's never existed apart from her sex.'

'Do any of us?' Jill mused, ruefully. 'Perhaps you wouldn't care about me if I were eighty.'

'Yes, I should, Jill. Yes, I should,' Graham bent his dark head to smile into her eyes. 'That you're a woman lends you charm; but it's incidental. If you were a man you would be my greatest friend. That's the test.'

'Your greatest friend? When I don't understand the things you live for? — when there's only one side of your life that I touch at all?'

'It's the only side where I need to touch humanity. All I need is someone to rest with and play with and be myself with. You're the perfect comrade; as well as the perfect wife, Jill.'

It was sweet to Jill to hear this, and to know how true it was. She had reflected more than once of late that, if happy married life consisted in each one going his own way, the trouble with her and Dick was that, while he had so very much of a way, she herself had, nowadays, none at all. Her only way was the English country way that Dick, as he had truly said, had taken

her from; gardening; games; and hunting. She thought of hunting now, as she and Dick went down through the chestnut forest and came out upon the river level in the waning evening light. Hounds — darling hounds — and dear horses, and familiar faces that represented not so much individuals as types who did the same things as oneself; and had done so for generations. All the woodland lore; all the crafty knowledge of gate and wall and ditch; all the unvoiced awareness of beauty everywhere, in earth and sky. It was the only real life, of course, from her point of view, in its cool, cheerful comradeship, its risks and endurances; its ecstasies of flight over wide spaces. The artist's life always seemed to her like a queer make-believe in comparison; like a child's game without basis or consistency. Not that Dick was like the others; — those weedy, tiresome young men talking, talking — heavens! how they talked! — of planes and stresses in the London studios. Dick cared for them all as little, really, as she did. He was not gregarious. Under the paints and canvases he was the same sort of person that she was; silent, indifferent; out-of-doors. But it was funny to spend your life butting your head against a wall, as it were; for to try to capture, to express nature, came to no more than that; did it? — Jill sometimes tried to think it out. Was not nature something transcendent which one entered and partook of? Was not art like trying to dip up the sea in a tea-cup? A branch of bramble, whitened by hoar frost and glanced at as one waited in the woods on a morning of cub-

hunting, seemed to have more in it than all their pictures put together. Once or twice, it was true, in looking at a great picture, Jill had felt herself brushed for a moment by a sense of mystery; by the sense that here indeed something had happened, something been shown to her that, face to face with nature, by herself, she would never have seen. Dick's pictures, strange, queer, even ugly as she found them, had given her that feeling once or twice; especially this last picture he had just finished of the great river and the plains and cliffs seen from the mountain-pass. But the picture could never give all that went with the visual experience. It did not give the feeling of the wind upon one's cheek, or the scent of bracken in the air, or the sound of birds and insects, of brooks and branches stirring; it was less; not more; so why try? why butt one's head? So Jill came back to it again. And it was amusing to know that where they all felt Dick great and waited expectantly for him to tell them something of his secret, to her his meaning and his worth consisted in being like the branch of bramble.

It was not till after dinner when, for their last evening, they had gone outside to the balcony, that Jill's thoughts again turned to the Manoir and its occupants.

'Isn't it odious to think of that poor old woman all alone up there, Dick?' she said, looking over the mysterious spaces of the river to the darkling cliff.

Dick's eyes rested on her. He was not thinking of the old lady. He would never think of her unless she

were before him for him to look at. 'It's nice of you to be so sorry for her,' was what he said.

'If she weren't so horribly alive, one wouldn't mind so much. — Aren't you sorry for her?'

'I don't suppose I am. I feel it's a law of nature that an old woman like that should perish rather miserably.'

'But it makes me sorry to think that a vulture should perish miserably.'

'A vulture, perhaps; but not an old woman who's like one. She's never created beauty, or sought truth, or known love; so how can she expect to have anything?'

'You are rather horrible, you know, Dick. Your heart is so hard. Why should you think she's meant nothing more than that? Anyone so alive must have.'

'I don't know that. A vulture is very much alive. Her vitality may all have gone to greed and passion and vanity.'

'She's wanted to be loved, of course; who doesn't? And she's wanted to be happy. She's been dreadfully unhappy; one can see it; and disappointed; and ravaged generally. And now she's like a motor-car shut up in a garage with its engine going and its headlights on, and it makes me uncomfortable to think of her — however wrong she's been.'

Dick was still looking at her. He had said to Madame de Lamouderie that afternoon that she was not æsthetically interesting and Jill had not minded in the least, for she knew how much Dick liked looking at her.

She was something quite apart from art, for him; just as he was for her. She was his branch of bramble. And now, after a moment, he put his hand behind her head and bent it back and kissed her neck and cheek. 'I like you very much,' he said.

And Jill, leaning against his shoulder, yielded to his caresses, smiled, thinking that it was a happy thing, after five years of marriage, that one's husband should still be one's lover. That was what made it all worth while.

CHAPTER VI

The Curê's Cat

IT was in early April that Jill and Richard Graham came back to Buissac. Jill drove the car along the winding valley road, its bordering poplars sharp and silvery against an apple-green sky. Behind them the sunset was apricot-coloured; and the cliffs were a cold mauve. Jill liked to drive and Graham liked to be driven; he said that he could not see anything at the steering-wheel. He sat, now, his scarf up around his ears, for the hood was down, gazing; silent. For hours, while they drove, he would sit like that, saying not a word, and Jill, as if she heard, through closed doors, a great orchestra playing, was vaguely aware of the splendid rhythms and harmonies that wreathed and unwreathed themselves in his mind. There was something sad in listening to an orchestra behind closed doors; yet something rather uplifting too. Even if one were left out, one was uplifted. She had not known the mingled state now for a long time.

Dick had disliked the Riviera as much as ever and had done no work there at all. In the intervals of tennis and dancing — and no one she had ever met, Jill considered, danced so divinely as Dick — he had sat in solitary, sunny corners above the sea and read metaphysics. Jill asked him to read aloud to her, when she found him thus, and stared at him with incredulous

eyes after a page of 'Appearance and Reality.' — 'Help! Help!' she cried. 'How perfectly devastating! How do you stand it? What's it all about?'

'You have to start young, Jill, to see that,' said Dick. He had laid his book face downward on his knee to look at her, and put his arm around her shoulders. He didn't care about her sharing philosophy a bit more than he did about her sharing art. All he wanted of her was her presence.

'What good does it do you?' asked Jill.

And, laughing, rising, stretching himself, Dick had answered, 'God knows! I only hope I may, too, if I go on looking.'

Dick was looking for something; that was what it came to. It was because of some inner quest that he had that remote, preoccupied, brooding gaze. How strange it was! Why couldn't people be satisfied with what was here and now?

She had not had to remind him of his promise to Madame de Lamouderie. After his long inaction his thoughts turned spontaneously to the Dordogne country where inspiration needed no seeking. Never, as he had told her, had he seen a country so tuned to his nature, so apt for his expression; and they were coming back to the Ecu d'Or because, of all the provincial inns they had stayed at, none had compared with it for economy and excellence.

The Ecu d'Or did not depend upon the precarious and seasonal supply of tourists — rare at the best in this district. The restaurant that opened, beneath the

balcony, upon the road, was filled every day by local clients, and as Jill and Graham drove up in the sharp, spring evening air, it was uproarious with melody and laughter. Some recent fair or festival must so have crowded it and at the central table a sprawling youth, his soft black hat tipped over his ear, his arm uplifted, entertained his friends with a song, its nasal terminal *e*'s prodigiously prolonged:

'Viv–e la câlin–e
Nuit d'amour —'

came the refrain.

Graham laughed as they heard it. 'Irreverent dog! He makes light of national divinities like the *nuit d'amour!* It's good, you know; — the roguery of his phrasing.'

Jill's lip curled a little. 'One does get fed up with them sometimes,' she remarked. And she suddenly realized that she was feeling fed up. It was a new, yet an old adventure beginning again, and for once it found her jaded and unresponsive. She did not want to laugh.

Monsieur Michon, pink of face and black of eye, was hurrying forward to greet them, and Graham handed out the lighter luggage to Amélie, her gaunt face glazed, as usual, with fatigue and perspiration. As usual, Dick refused to allow her to charge herself like a beast of burden with the heavier valises and they made their way upstairs while Madame Michon, emerging from the kitchen to smile and bow, called up to Amélie

that Monsieur et Madame were to have the rooms they had so much appreciated last year. '*C'est bon de vous revoir, Madame,*' she said to Jill. '*Vous aimez donc notre petit* Buissac?' and Jill had to say she did, though feeling that she so little loved to-night the noisy restaurant, Monsieur Michon's affability, or Madame Michon's mole with the crisp black hairs gushing out of it.

While Dick went to put away the car and while Amélie descended to fetch hot water, Jill leaned on her window-sill and looked out over the river. It was strange how she was thinking of England this evening, thinking of its quiet, its decorum, its dullness; and with yearning. How far away it seemed! How unattainable, almost! And what was she to do with herself now? Try to read and understand 'Appearance and Reality,' perhaps.

Graham had remarked, more than once, that the reason the food was so good at the Ecu d'Or was because they had not attempted baths or hot-water pipes, and Amélie soon appeared with the two steaming *brocs*.

Jill turned to smile at her. She had elicited from Amélie on her last stay that her wages were piteously small and had told her that she could easily find her a good place with friends in Paris; but Amélie was not able to leave *une vieille Maman*. Jill now asked after this impeding relative and heard, with regret, that she was in thriving health.

'How would you like, Jill,' Dick asked from the ad-

joining room, when he had come up and was splashing happily, 'to take a house here? — if you're fed up with this place.' Dick was often unaware of one's moods, but he never forgot an expressed feeling.

'Oh — it's not the Ecu d'Or I mind,' said Jill, getting out her little black crêpe-de-Chine dress. It was a delightful garment and had served her well for a year. One turn and it was over your head, and one tie and it was adjusted. She slipped on her pearls, for Dick liked to see her in them. 'It's France itself, sometimes, you know. We are such strangers here; and if we lived here for a hundred years we'd be strangers just the same. I suppose the place is still full of starving cats.'

'Let us hope that most of them have died during the winter,' said Dick cheerfully. 'People are much nearer the bare bones of existence here than with us. They're starved themselves, as I think I've said before.'

'Monsieur Michon isn't starved; or Madame either. It's a country of fat men and thin animals,' said Jill bitterly.

'The Michons aren't *peuple*. You don't see many fat peasants. I like it, you know. I like the bare bones; the sense of having got away from smugness and civilization. A place like this is still essentially mediæval.'

'Yes; and I suppose they left their dust lying in heaps along the road in the Middle Ages, too.'

'Worse than their dust.'

'Well, nothing could be worse than that headless corpse of a dog we found on the river-path. It had

lain there for months and no one had troubled to take a spade and bury it.'

'They have no sense of public responsibility. They're individualists to a man. Even when they seem to have acquired it — in the big towns — it's only because an energetic mayor, with his eye on the Chambre des Députés, dragoons them into efficiency. I like it, as I say, if it doesn't leave too many dead dogs about.'

Monsieur Michon, in the stuffy little dining-room that smelt of beeswax and sour wine, was waiting to serve them himself and, as usual, the dinner was excellent. Monsieur Michon hovered near while they ate, eager to impart the history of each dish he found appreciated. The fish came from the river — and came that very afternoon; it was a fine fish, *n'est-ce-pas;* — and could he give Madame a little more of the *sauce piquante?* The chicken had been fattened in their own *basse-cour* and he brought the crisp salad and dressed it on the table before them so that they should observe his dexterous minglings and turnings.

'Do you know whether Madame de Lamouderie is well?' Jill asked, realizing that Monsieur Michon might find her silence unsympathetic, and feeling better, after the chicken.

'Ah, *la vieille dame.* I have not seen her all winter,' said Monsieur Michon, standing beside them ready for conversation over the pastry and wine. 'She is there, I know; but she never comes down into the village. Only Monsieur Trumier — the old servant. Madame

Blondel, at the *mercerie*, is Monsieur Trumier's niece, and he often comes to see her and her children. But the old lady, no. It has been a cold winter. She will have found it long. But now that Mademoiselle Ludérac has returned it will go better with her.'

As she heard the name it seemed to Jill that she remembered something long forgotten; that she reentered the sense of expectancy, of fairy-tale; sad or happy. She saw the solitary grave under the chestnut branches; the bare, sad room at the Manoir and the fading autumn roses.

'Does Mademoiselle Ludérac come down often?' she asked.

'She comes sometimes; yes; she comes. She is a very eccentric young lady,' said Monsieur Michon dispassionately.

'In what way eccentric?' It was Jill who questioned. Graham had ordered a glass of the cognac that he remembered as so excellent and was turning the stem of his glass slowly while he watched the light shine in it.

'She cares nothing — nothing at all for human beings, but has a mania for animals,' smiled Monsieur Michon. 'Did Madame not see many old useless animals up at the Manoir? — She finds them; she collects them — *Dieu sait comment.* They seem to know by instinct when she goes by. I have seen her pass with a mangy dog in her arms, a dirty old dog, full of vermin, which crawled out from a heap of refuse down by the river when she looked over the wall one day. He had

been thrown down there to die, no doubt; and better to have left him. — But no. She carried him up to the Manoir and tended him and fed him, we may suppose, and Monsieur Trumier shot him to make a good end of the story. She does not carry her mania so far as to keep them all alive. When they are too old and ill, they are shot; dogs, cats, goats, what you will; — we heard of a sheep one day. — It is a strange occupation for a young lady.'

'I don't think it strange at all,' said Jill, but she was too much absorbed by what Monsieur Michon had told to speak indignantly; her eyes dwelt on him. 'I think it only too natural; — for there are a great many unhappy animals in Buissac.'

'Ah, Madame, there are unhappy people, and animals, everywhere,' said Monsieur Michon with a touch of dryness. 'For my part I think it more natural to devote oneself to one's own kind. The beasts do not feel as we do. And they are there for our use and convenience.'

Jill was now aware of indignation. 'They are only there like that because we are stronger than they are. They have just as much right to live as we have; — more right than a lot of us!' she exclaimed, while Graham, peeling an orange for her, listened with a smile.

'Well, Madame would then agree with Mademoiselle Ludérac,' said Monsieur Michon; and, a further memory coming, he laughed a little. — 'She is a very eccentric young lady. She struck Monsieur le curé one day!'

'Struck him?' It was Graham who questioned, his face lighted by amusement. 'What for?'

'It was during a dispute over an animal — *bien entendu.* Monsieur le curé is irascible — and Mademoiselle Ludérac is not a favourite of his. — She is not *pratiquante;* though once a year she goes to High Mass with the old lady. It was his cat she had found; his own cat; very thin: soon to be a mother; and it had followed her crying. When Monsieur le curé met her, carrying it up to the Manoir, he was very angry. They came to bitter words. He tried, I believe, to take the cat from her. She resisted. Finally it was blows. All the village saw, though I, unfortunately, was absent on that day. The cat escaped in the scuffle and was never seen again; but Monsieur le curé always affirms that she managed to find it and to conceal — or kill it — up at the Manoir. He said that he had never possessed such a mouser. Madame Céleste, his housekeeper, depended on it. A cat does not catch mice well, Madame, if it is fed.' Monsieur Michon felt that Jill's sympathies were not with the curé.

'I hate their killing mice!' Jill exclaimed. 'I'm so glad it escaped. I'm glad she struck the curé, too.' And, laughing again, with a bow for a charming lady's extravagance, Monsieur Michon returned to his clients in the café below.

'How perfectly glorious!' Jill exclaimed. Her mood of apathy was gone — 'It puts a new heart into one to hear anything like that. The starving cats of Buissac have a patron saint.'

'A warrior saint. Yes. She sounds a terrifying young person,' said Graham, still laughing and handing Jill her cleverly separated orange. 'Though I'm glad, too, that she struck the curé. I remember him. A fat old scoundrel; bloated with sacramental wine and wafers. But I'm afraid your heroine is a little *détraquée*, Jill. Monsieur Michon evidently thinks so.'

'Monsieur Michon would think Joan of Arc *détraquée*. I can't bear Monsieur Michon.'

'He's the same type as the curé, isn't he; — only gone into another business; *dans la libre pensée*, as he would put it. I hope the curé had an umbrella while he fought,' said Graham, still amused by the thought of the combat. 'That would complete the picture. One of those distended black cotton umbrellas they carry. And he'd stick it under his arm while he wrestled for his cat.'

'Poor, poor little creature! Soon to be a mother!' said Jill, thinking of their cherished family cat at home and her tenderly supervised *accouchements*. 'Yes. I can see the umbrella; — and I can see the cat, with its round, horrified eyes.'

'My dear Jill, life isn't long enough — we're not strong enough — to begin to think of all the cats.'

'Never mind. I'll think about Mademoiselle Ludérac's cats. And I shall go up and see her to-morrow,' said Jill.

CHAPTER VII

Childe Roland

WHEN the next afternoon came it brought a chill spring rain, and as Jill in her raincoat started for the Manoir, Graham joined her. It was too wet for painting.

At the kitchen door Jill paused to ask Madame Michon if the road to the Manoir past the cemetery were the only way. 'I seem to remember a little path running down from the vineyards.'

'Madame has a good memory,' said Madame Michon, drying her arms as she came forward from dish-washing. Even when engaged in the most menial tasks, Madame Michon maintained an air of panoply and conquest. Her hair was richly undulated and her bosom solidly sustained by stays that gave every advantage to the opulent curves of her figure. 'There is another way; but it is a rough climb. Do you see, at the end of the village, where the road turns up the mountain?' — Madame Michon led them to the door and pointed: — 'there is a causeway built out to what we call the island. What you can see from here, with the groves of poplars, is indeed an island, for the water goes all round it; but when you come to it you will find a long stretch of meadow between it and the mainland. The people graze their cattle there, and grow their hay; it is the finest meadow in

the *commune*. You descend to it and follow it, round the promontory, and you will find a bridge crossing the stream that flows at the foot of the cliff. From there you climb to the *grande route*, and from the road straight up to the vineyards. You cannot miss the path. It runs straight up from the meadow to the Manoir.'

'And who uses it? The Manoir people?' Jill asked.

'No; Monsieur Trumier brings down their grapes, at the vintage, by the road — and they have no cattle. It is used only by some poor folk who live in the cottage below the Manoir and graze their sheep and goats on the island. Indeed it is fit only for goats and Madame would do better to keep to the road.'

'No; because the road leads past the cemetery, and I don't like cemeteries,' said Jill.

'Ah, Madame is sensitive,' Madame Michon smiled. 'And it is true that cemeteries have lugubrious associations. But ours is well arranged; — *on peut même dire coquet*,' said Madame Michon. 'Madame has not yet visited it?'

'Yes. I've visited it. It's certainly very neat,' said Jill. — '*Coquet!*' she repeated, as they set out.

Graham smiled sardonically, but made no comment on Madame Michon's laudatory term.

The peninsula that ran out from the foot of the mountain had been built, they found, when they reached the end of the village, into a breakwater, half natural and half artificial. It was broad enough to allow of the passage of a hay-cart and sloped down to the rich alluvial meadow that must once have been

the river bed. Two arms of the river enclosed the meadow, dividing it on one side from the cliff and on the other from the island proper, whose rocky outer shores, continuing the breakwater, followed the great sweep of the river round the promontory. Jill paused on the causeway to look at the sluices which regulated the currents.

'You see it can all be irrigated in dry weather,' she said, her country eye gratified by the promise of admirable crops. 'And this dyke is so high that I don't think any flood could ever go over it. What splendid hay they must have! How cleverly it's all contrived!'

'As well contrived as the cemetery, isn't it,' said Graham, looking up at the beetling cliff.

'Just as well. But it does them more credit.'

'I don't like contrivances. They show a bee-like brain.'

'Not a bit of it. They show new ideas. Bees do the same thing over and over. The people of Buissac can make this and the cemetery, too. There are our cows, over on the island.'

'Let's go to the island. I like the island, but I don't like the meadow,' said Graham. 'The cliff looks like a tidal wave above it.'

'We haven't time for the island to-day. We must find the bridge. I don't see it.'

'It's on the other side of the promontory, Madame Michon said. — No, it's not pleasant being down here,' Graham remarked, as they descended and went forward on the meadow. 'I feel that the tidal wave will

curl over at the tip and come surging down upon us. It's a horrible thing, really, a great height above you.'

'Nonsense, Dick. — There's nothing horrible about it. — Look at the cows under the poplars if you don't want to look at the cliff.'

But Graham said: 'One can't look at cows when the cliff is there.'

They rounded the promontory and found the bridge, a mere plank and handrail, laid across the inner stream. Then, when they had crossed the bridge, it was bare cliff-side they climbed, and then, as Madame Michon had told them, they crossed the *grande route*, breasted the steeper ascent, and soon found themselves among the vineyards. 'And here we are on the tip of your tidal wave,' said Jill, when, at the top, they paused to look around them. From here the island was lost to view. It was only grey sky, grey river, that they saw, and the rain-dimmed hillsides opposite.

'Yes. The very tip. — And what a dismal day!' said Graham. 'A sort of end of all things.'

'A beginning of all things; — it's full of the spring. Don't you smell and feel it? The vines are budding, and we might hear a chiff-chaff at any moment. I love this sort of day; it's so soft and kind. What an old pessimist you are, Dick.'

Graham put his arm through hers. 'That's why I married you. — Come on. — What I feel now is that we'll find the old lady lying dead in the Manoir.'

'No; she's kept alive, to see you again, as you told her she would do,' said Jill.

They approached the Manoir through the vineyards and in a few moments saw the high roof and green-stained walls through the sycamore branches.

'It's happier now the leaves aren't out to hide it,' said Jill.

'All the same, it's an uncanny place,' said Graham. 'Was ever anything so still? Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came. — You're like Childe Roland, Jill.'

'Well, I'll blow my horn, then,' said Jill. Graham had read 'Childe Roland' to her and she had liked it. She put her hand to the door in the wall and pushed it open; but the bell did not clang above their heads. It still hung there, they saw; but the chain was broken, so it was in silence that they approached up the mossy path.

'What a pity we're too late for the snow-drops,' Jill whispered. 'They've been everywhere.'

As they stood at the door debating whether to knock or ring, a young woman came in the rain round the corner of the house. She wore a black mackintosh and one hand held a black knitted shawl under her chin; the other carried an earthenware dish. She had a pale face and dark eyes and she stopped short on seeing them and stood looking at them for a moment, as an animal stops to look when confronted by an unexpected object. There was something in her gaze that made Jill think of an animal; it was so grave and so unconscious; and after the pause of contemplation she turned and disappeared as she had come.

'Can it be Mademoiselle Ludérac?' Jill whispered.

Graham did not reply at once. He was looking at the place where the young woman had been. 'I don't think so,' he then said. 'It looked like a peasant woman.' He had a curiously perplexed expression and it was curious to hear him say 'it' as if speaking of an animal; an unknown, beautiful animal that had crossed their path.

'I think we'd better knock,' said Jill, after they had stood in silence for another moment.

'What about going back?' said Dick, looking at her, still with the curious look; though he smiled.

'Going back?'

'Yes. What if Childe Roland didn't blow the horn?'

'But Dick!' Jill tried to laugh, not quite succeeding, 'are you frightened?'

'Perhaps I am. Or perhaps I'm superstitious.'

'Do you think it was a ghost?' smiled Jill, and her own lips felt a little queer.

'Well, it may have been, you know.' Graham had Highland blood and it had played him, Jill knew, a trick or two before this. She would not tolerate the mood. 'Well, we'll face it, then,' she said, and she lifted her hand with determination to the knocker.

But before she had sounded it, the door swung open. It seemed, as if her words had been a spell, to have opened of itself and even Jill's calm English blood gave an unpleasant turn. Then she saw that behind the door was Joseph.

'*Entrez*, Monsieur et Dame,' he said.

'But we did not ring! We did not knock! How did

you know?' said Jill. In spite of Joseph her blood was not quite comfortable; he was not reassuring, somehow; older, more derelict, more disintegrated than ever. But she now saw that he wore a peasant's blouse and had on sabots clogged with mud.

'Mademoiselle saw Monsieur et Madame and told me to open,' said Joseph in his flat, impartial tones.

The explanation, when given, was self-evident. Jill and Graham stripped off their wet coats and Joseph ushered then into the salon.

There, beside a wood fire that burned brightly, sat the old lady in her *bergère;* fast asleep. Joseph did not announce them to his unconscious mistress. He glanced at her cursorily, and muttering, 'Mademoiselle *rentrera tout-à-l'heure,*' closed the door and left them.

'Poor old thing; how she'll hate being caught like this,' Jill whispered. 'Shall we sit down and wait?'

'*Tout-à-l'heure* is non-committal. It's not nearly tea-time yet,' said Graham. He glanced around him as he spoke; uneasily. 'I'll wake her, I think. It would startle her to wake and find us sitting here looking at her. — She'd feel as if *we* were ghosts.'

And still he paused and still he looked around him. 'Is that a harp? It wasn't here last autumn.'

The tall object, standing in its green baize case at the further end of the room, was certainly a harp. 'Who plays it, I wonder?' said Jill. 'No; it wasn't here. Can it be Mademoiselle Ludérac's?'

'I don't like it; whoever plays it,' said Graham.

'And there's still time to go back, Jill. We could ask Joseph not to tell the old lady, and she'd never be the wiser.'

'But Dick — leave Buissac! — How too nonsensical you are! And it's not only her; we've come to see Mademoiselle Ludérac as well.'

'*I* haven't come to see her,' said Graham. 'But since you'll have it so — ' He went forward and laid his hand gently on Madame de Lamouderie's shoulder.

She raised her head, opened her eyes and looked up at him; fixedly; quietly. She wore no paint; nor any lace on her white hair. She was beautiful, Jill thought, watching her awaken under Graham's touch. There was something innocent, even lovely, in her look. '*Que me voulez-vous?*' she said in a tranced voice.

'A cup of tea,' smiled Graham. 'And a promise that I shall paint you as the Sleeping Beauty.'

The old lady still sat leaning back in her chair, motionless; gazing at him. 'Everything you wish — everything you wish,' she murmured. 'How have you found me? I have waited long for you.'

'Clever princes always find their princesses,' said Graham; but he was troubled and cast a questioning glance on Jill, standing behind him.

She came forward to his rescue. 'It's spring, and we've come back, as we said we should,' she told the old lady, whose eyes, still tranquil from their dream, turned on her. 'Don't you remember Richard and Gillian Graham?'

The old lady looked at her with a sort of astonishment. Then she struggled suddenly to her feet. 'Dieu — Dieu — Dieu!' she uttered. '*Non!* It is not possible!' She seized Jill's outstretched hands. '*Que vous êtes bons! Que vous êtes charmants! Je ne sais pas où je suis — tellement vous me rendez heureuse!*' She did not know where she was. It was evident. She held them by their hands and looked from one to the other with ecstatic eyes. '*Que vous êtes bons!*' she repeated. 'You have come back! and I did not think that I should ever see you again. — It seems to me that decades have passed since you were last here; — as if you came to me from far, far away; from my youth. — *Mais asseyez-vous donc; asseyez-vous; — que je vous regarde bien.*'

They could see, when they had taken the chairs, one on either side of her, which her trembling hand indicated, that the poor old lady had not worn well. She looked very much older than they remembered her as looking and had something of the dreadful aspect of a waxen image galvanized suddenly to precarious life. But as they talked to her, and told her that they were to stay in Buissac for weeks — perhaps for months, the banked fires crept forth again; the smiles came, arch, provocative; the light of hope, of zest, of avidity, flickered in her great black eyes. They could note, too, that though taken unaware and somewhat dishevelled by her siesta, she was yet much neater and fresher than in the autumn. Her hair was carefully dressed in large puffs on the top of her head; the black lace fichu at her

neck was gracefully knotted and a very clean handkerchief lay on the small table, with a bowl of violets beside it.

'Ah, it is too good to be believed! I can hardly understand it yet,' she said. 'That you have come; that you are to stay; that I am to see you with peace and quietness of heart.'

'Where's the parrot?' asked Graham. 'He is to go into the portrait, you know.'

'The portrait? Do you really mean to paint my portrait?'

'I've come back to Buissac to paint it.' The old lady's happiness seemed to have infected Graham and to have dispelled his clouds and, again, as she saw him smile upon her and saw her smile of adoration answer him, Jill felt the stir of trouble, of pity. It was almost as if Dick were a resplendent, careless sun-god and the old lady a hapless, rapturous Semele doomed to be shrivelled by such rays.

'But Coco is dead,' she told him. 'Can you paint me without Coco?'

'Dead? Parrots never die.'

'Ah; — Coco died, however. Yes. It is too true. And of old age, I fear; like the rest of us. Joseph found him lying on the floor of his cage one morning; cold and stiff. So it will be with me before so long.'

'Nonsense. You're not going to die in your cage,' Graham reminded her. 'You are going to die on a mountain-pass on an autumn morning, with the vineyards below you and the menacing French sky above.'

Madame de Lamouderie's eyes lighted with the rapturous recollection. 'You have not forgotten! Nor I! Nor I! Not one word of our meeting have I forgotten! — Ah, Madame, your husband is a remarkable man; you will not deny that, I know. — One has only to glance at him and one sees genius on his brow. — So it was with me that day. I saw him painting there; silent; absorbed; unaware; I looked and looked. Then I made bold to speak. I could not pass him by. One does not twice in a lifetime meet young geniuses painting by the wayside. A menacing sky? Ah, it is you who are menacing; — you and your work. — If the sky looked to me in nature as it does on your canvas, I do not know that I should care to die under it. How should I face such a sky, when I cannot face my curé! — No; I do not face him, I am such a sinner. — Once a year the poor man climbs up to hear my confession (for I tell him that I am too old to go to his church — and that is a falsehood, to begin with; but a confessional fills me with dismay); — and I tell him to place himself on a chair; so; — while I sit here; so; — my back to him. And then I tell him all my enormities; — such enormities as an ancient, caged old woman can commit; — lies, evil tempers, gluttony; envy; malice; — what you will. — And while I tell, I see the poor curé stealing glances round over his shoulder at me — to be sure that he has heard aright. — A fat, red man with a hand on each knee. — Sometimes,' said the old lady, flown with the evident success of her recital, 'I tell him sins I have not committed to see what he will do!'

'Was that the same curé that Mademoiselle Ludérac struck?' asked Jill, when they had done laughing.

Madame de Lamouderie's triumphant smile vanished and she looked at her, arrested. 'Mademoiselle Ludérac? You know her? She has already spoken with you?'

'We don't know her at all. We were only told how fond she was of animals; — you told us that, too; — and how she tried to save the curé's cat.'

The old lady still looked disconcerted as though the mention of her landlady's name had damped her spirits. 'They are not friends; — not friends at all, Marthe and the curé. But it is not fair to say she struck him. Marthe is very gentle. He hurt the cat in trying to get it from her and it was only then that she raised her hand against him.' And suddenly the old lady laughed. 'I should have liked to see his face! He is a pompous man and it was, I feel sure, a good, bold blow. He shows a forgiving spirit in coming to hear my confession after that episode. And indeed we never speak of it.'

'And aren't we to see her? Aren't we to make her acquaintance to-day?' Jill asked. 'I love animals, too; and I feel I should like Mademoiselle Ludérac.'

The old lady gazed at her, sobered once more, and Jill realized that her expression was like nothing so much as that of a child who has been asked to share a box of chocolates with a companion.

'But yes, certainly; of course you will make her acquaintance — since you will so often make me glad

by coming here,' she said slowly. 'But to-day she will not, I know, be persuaded to come in. She is not at all accustomed to the world. She is very *farouche;* very *sauvage* — how do you say, very shy and timid indeed,' said the old lady, helping herself out with the English words. 'And she would not interest you, Madame, oh, not in any way. She is a simple country girl; a simple, good little bourgeoise. She does not know of any of the things that interest *gens du monde,* like ourselves. She does not know the world at all.'

'But I have heaps of friends who are not *gens du monde,*' said Jill, looking at the old lady with the thoughtfulness that was, as far as she was concerned, her nearest approach to displeasure. 'In fact I don't think I know many *gens du monde* at all; — except Dick's mother,' and Jill cast a glance of shared amusement upon her husband. 'She's very, very *du monde;* more than we always care for, isn't she, Dick?'

'Far more,' said Graham, tersely.

'And if Mademoiselle Ludérac is timid she'll have to get used to us,' Jill went on, while the old lady's eyes turned with their manifest anxiety from one to the other. 'Since we shall probably be here all spring, she'll have plenty of time. Perhaps she'll take me for some walks, in the mornings, while Dick paints you.'

The arrest in the old lady that followed these words was even more pronounced than the first had been, though Jill soon saw that they had induced relief and not dismay. 'But she will be honoured; — charmed, indeed, if you will indeed bear with her. — It will not

interest you to go with her often; — that I must warn you; but once or twice; for her to show you some of our little-known *points de vue;* — yes; that will indeed be a treat for the excellent Marthe. — But the mornings?' — again anxiety clouded her face. 'It is in the mornings that she has all her work, here in the house, to do. And she practices her harp for hours. She rarely gets out then; — unless it is into the garden or *basse-cour*. And I myself am a late riser. — Must the portrait be for the morning?'

'I'd rather come in the afternoon,' Graham assured her. 'And it will only be on rainy days, for I have my landscapes to think of in fine weather.' And Jill, seeing relief dawn again on the strained old face, smiled inwardly, thinking: 'Yes; never fear — you poor old thing; you shall have him all to yourself.'

Joseph, at this point, tidied up, in his felt slippers and white tie, appeared with the tea-tray, and as he set it down on the centre table it revealed the influence of a superior and supervising hand. It was laid with a fine white cloth and besides the biscuits there was a plate of fresh pastries upon which the old lady's eye fastened with a glad avidity. 'Ah! Marthe has been baking! Here is indeed a treat for us!' she exclaimed. And then Joseph, standing at the door with his weary impartiality of demeanour, announced, before leaving: 'Mademoiselle begs to be excused from attendance at tea. She is very much occupied this afternoon.'

'*Bien. Bien*, Joseph. *C'est bien*,' the old lady repeated, dismissing the unnecessary information as quickly as

possible. And pouring out their tea, she began, with her released and happy volubility, to tell them again about herself; about her salon in Paris; her sons, who had been '*garçons charmants*,' but '*très, très dissipés*'; her one remaining child, a princess; a Russian princess, who had had to flee before the Bolsheviks to a refuge offered by a relative in South America. 'I shall never see her again, never,' she declared. 'And when we meet it is not always happy. She is like her father; she has a violent temper and is *d'un égoïsme effrayant*. — I am alone in the world; quite alone. And no one cares whether I live or die.'

CHAPTER VIII

Marthe Ludérac

IT was three days later that Graham, carrying his easel, canvas, and painting utensils, went up to the Manoir. The day was fine and he had told Madame de Lamouderie that he would not come unless it rained; but he had spent the morning far down the river, painting from the bank, and, coming in late for lunch, as he often did, found Jill departed in the car. She would not be back till tea-time. So the moment seemed opportune for beginning the long-promised portrait of the old lady. But deeper than the sense of the opportune, the mood was upon him to test again upon his own nerves, unfortified by Jill, the uncanny quality he felt in the Manoir and its occupants; its unknown occupants. The old lady he did not feel uncanny. He understood her too well for that.

It was a lovely, melancholy spring day and a solitary thrush was fluting and calling in the chestnut forest. Most of the thrushes would have been shot and eaten during the winter, but that gave a wilder, sweeter potency to this surviving song.

Wild daffodils grew among the glades, and a powdering of violets rested like a soft blue cloud along the roadside. Already the mood of the other day seemed exorcised. His blood ran peacefully. How strange it was to know oneself at heart still so much the child of

fears and visions. Thinking of the other day and of the foreboding that had seized him, took him far back into his childhood, linked him with the wild-eyed little boy who had rushed down from his room to take refuge with his father on a winter night, and who could never tell or explain what the dark fear — or presence — had been that had wakened him. But no; it had not been fear the other day. Not fear exactly.

Behind the reddening branches of the sycamores the Manoir to-day, freaked with swaying sunlight, looked like the happiest sort of Sickert; that, at best, was not very happy, to be sure; but the Manoir, too, seemed exorcised. If magic there were, it was no longer a dark magic. And no figure came round the house as he stood on the doorstep; no blind old dog. No woman with a pale face framed in black.

Joseph opened to his knock, and Joseph, too, showed signs of revival, looked as if the spring had penetrated to his doleful bones. Madame la comtesse, he told him, was upstairs in her room; he would apprise her of Monsieur's coming. Mademoiselle was in the salon. And so saying he ushered him in and Graham found himself face to face with Mademoiselle Ludérac.

She had, apparently, but just come in from a country walk, for a basket of the wild daffodils stood on the table and a number of vases, most of them already filled, were ranged about it. She was coming down the room, two vases in her hands, and for a moment she stopped short on seeing him, rather as she had stopped

the other day when she had found him and Jill standing in uncertainty before the door. Then, bending her head in a grave acknowledgement of his presence, she went on with her task, expecting, evidently, neither to be spoken to nor to speak.

Graham was disconcerted by her demeanour. It was not that — though the silence in the presence of a visitor might have suggested it — of a mere housekeeper; not at all that of 'my landlady.' Rather, he felt, while he stood near the window at the other end of the room and watched her as she quietly moved here and there, placing her daffodils, it was the demeanour of a *châtelaine* when some man of affairs, unknown to her, is ushered in to wait for those who have cognizance of his business. She might be *sauvage*, she might be *farouche*, and in her attire and appearance she made him think of the young peasant woman; but she made him, in her demeanour, think still more of the *châtelaine*, and, as he watched her, these meagre analogies were enlarged by a host of vague, floating associations. Something in her tall form, in the close lines of her hair, bound in a braided knot, reminded him of the statue of a Roman lady. She wore a black sateen apron buttoning at neck and wrists, and her long white hands, as she placed the vases, took beautiful attitudes of fluent, tranquil grace. One could see those hands laid with mastery on the majestic strings of a harp; her harp stood in the corner; and, with the element of majesty in the picture she now evoked, it was a Saint Cecilia he saw, Saint Cecilia, the Roman lady,

who lighted her pale tapers in a chamber dedicated to early Christian rites.

And while he saw all this, he seemed not to see her face at all; though he was aware of it as a whiteness, inaccessible to analogy; and it seemed to drift like a soft but dazzling light at which one could not look fixedly.

He heard Madame de Lamouderie's precipitate heels tapping down the stairs. They paused outside the door and it was almost, Graham felt, as if the enamoured old lady stood there for a moment to quiet the strong beating of her heart. Then she entered, with outstretched hands.

'Is it possible! You have come to do my portrait! Though it does not rain!' she cried, and she cast a glance at Mademoiselle Ludérac, but did not speak to her. If Mademoiselle Ludérac consented to remain in the place of the mere landlady, Madame de Lamouderie would leave her there. And she seemed, with her tranquillity, to consent; she carried two vases into a little alcove at the end of the room.

'I have not met your friend,' said Graham. He had felt, subconsciously, a sense of resentment while he watched Mademoiselle Ludérac, and he did not know, now that he became aware of it, whether it attached itself more to her or to her old protector.

'You have not met Marthe!' cried Madame de Lamouderie, as if it surprised her. '*Mais comment donc!* She has not introduced herself! Come here, Marthe; come, *ma chérie.* I wish you to know Monsieur

Graham; Monsieur Richard Graham, the celebrated painter of whom I have spoken to you. All Europe rings with his fame, so that you will not forget that this is a great day in your life. Mademoiselle Marthe Ludérac, Monsieur; my very dear young friend and companion. And I am to present you also to Madame Graham. I specially wish you to know Madame Graham. — It does not disarrange your plans that Monsieur Graham should come in the afternoons and paint my portrait here? — We will be very careful; — very quiet and tidy,' smiled the old lady with an odd effect of cajolery.

The young woman stood looking quietly, even appeasingly upon her, almost, Graham thought, as though she reminded her that with her, Marthe Ludérac, she might be reasonable. Never indeed had he seen his old friend in such a flurried humour. She was almost mincing, though so exuberant.

'I shall be charmed,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac in a gentle voice.

'Then come, Monsieur. Where will you place yourself? Where shall I sit? Am I dressed as you would have me?'

'Can I assist you?' Mademoiselle Ludérac asked as Graham, with an uncharacteristic clumsiness, overturned his easel in placing it.

'Oh; — thank you; thank you a thousand times. — I can manage perfectly,' he answered, and he felt, still more resentfully, that of the three Mademoiselle Ludérac was the only one who was natural and composed.

'And Marthe — our dear Coco; dead!' exclaimed the old lady, as she seated herself in the bergère. 'Monsieur Graham so specially wished to paint me with Coco beside me. — Is it not a disaster? — We have an assortment of animals, here, Monsieur, as I have told you; all Marthe's pets; — a hare; a dog; a cat; two cats now, are there not, Marthe? — would not one of those do as well?'

'I'm afraid not,' said Graham, smiling, and feeling himself somewhat restored as he set his canvas in its place and laid his utensils on the table. 'I don't see you with a hare in your arms; or a cat either. Coco, in design and colour and character, was what I needed; and since he has gone I shall do you without appurtenances. — But one thing you still have that I should like; the black lace for your head; — and, may I be frank? — the rouge for your lips. We need that for the Goya almost as much as your black eyes.'

The old lady trembled with excitement and gratification.

'Marthe' — she whispered, 'could you? —'

'But most certainly,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac, and, smiling appeasingly as her eyes met the black eyes of the Goya, she left the room.

'She will get them,' whispered the old lady. 'She will give me all I need. She is my good angel.' So flustered was she, it was evident, that she hardly knew what she was saying.

Mademoiselle Ludérac returned with the lace mantilla, a box of powder, a stick of rouge, and a mirror,

which she gave into the old lady's hand; but: 'No, no'; whispered Madame de Lamouderie, 'will you do me, Marthe?' And, still slightly smiling, but quite without mockery, Mademoiselle Ludérac, kneeling beside her, traced carefully, and with a practised hand, the red along the lips, and softly patted the withered cheeks with the powder-puff. Then, when she had adjusted the mantilla: 'Let me see,' the old lady said, still whispering; and Mademoiselle Ludérac again handed her the mirror so that she might survey herself therein. She looked for a long moment and gave it back with a sigh, whether of discouragement or satisfaction Graham could not tell. The little scene riveted his attention.

'Are you pleased with me?' the old lady asked humbly.

'You are beautiful,' said Graham, and he looked steadily at her, more aware, as he looked, of the tall form of the young woman beside her than of his sitter.

'*Elle me rend belle.* She is a magician. She does it for me when I go to Mass,' said the old lady, and her eyes left his for a moment to glance up in gratitude at Mademoiselle Ludérac.

'All is then well?' said the young woman.

'All is well?' Madame de Lamouderie questioned, her eyes on Graham.

'All is perfect; quite perfect,' said Graham, taking up his charcoal. He was wondering whether Mademoiselle Ludérac was going to remain with them and

he felt that if she did so he would not be able to draw one significant line.

But, moving away, placing the two tall vases on the mantelpiece, she took her basket, passed a cloth over the table where the water had spilled, and went out, closing the door softly behind her.

Neither Graham nor Madame de Lamouderie spoke for some time after she had left them. Graham drew quickly, with bright, intent glances, and the old lady gazed with rapt docility at her painter. But as her breaths quieted, and her excitement dispersed itself in a general glow, her expression insensibly altered and he saw that his own old lady was returning to him, an old lady very different from Mademoiselle Ludérac's, or even Jill's; it was with him that she was her reallest self, and when her eyes met his it was as if there were a sense of complicity between them, a sense of entering a realm of experience from which such innocents were shut away.

'You look, as you sit there,' she told him, 'like a dear friend of my youth. A charming man; a finished *homme du monde*, but artist to his finger-tips. He had marvellous collections; — bronzes, gems, enamels; it was known throughout Europe. A splendid emerald I once possessed was his gift to me; — with my husband's sanction, *bien entendu*.'

Graham smiled but made no comment, and after a moment the old lady took up her tale. 'My husband and he had business enterprises together — alas, all unsuccessful; all ruinous. And he was my husband's

second in several affairs of honour. He was, in fact, *l'ami de la maison* and at one time I thought that he aspired to the hand of my second daughter. But he confessed to me one day that he could never love the daughter while the mother was before his eyes. It will be difficult for you to believe it now, Monsieur, but in my youth I was beautiful.'

'I think I remember your telling us that all the greatest painters in Europe competed for the privilege of painting you,' said Graham. His was the faculty of saying ironic words with such detachment and courtesy that they seemed a tribute rather than an offence. The old lady, at all events, did not take these amiss.

'He, for a man, was what I was for a woman,' she went on, the melancholy yet pleasing retrospect softening her voice. 'Tall; superb; haughty. He had your eyes, your noble brow and chin. He had your gloom and fire. He was greatly feared, and greatly loved. Never again have I seen such an Apollo; till now.'

'And your husband was not jealous?'

'Ah, Monsieur,' said the old lady, 'he was furiously jealous. His jealousy wrecked my life.'

'I don't blame him,' said Graham, and he dropped his slow 'Ha-ha!'

'I should not be here to-day if it had not been for his insensate jealousy.' The old lady enlarged her theme while she basked in Graham's gaze. 'Not that Monsieur de Larbier was my only admirer.'

'Your husband should have felt that there was safety

in such numbers,' said Graham, and he continued to laugh softly to himself.

The old lady, even in her most dramatic moods, rarely lost her warning sense of the ridiculous, and she cast upon him now a quick, measuring glance. 'Ah, Monsieur, it does not follow, you know, that there is always safety in numbers,' she rejoined, and with such a change of tone, with so much of edge and *malice* in her gaiety that Graham for a moment was disconcerted. 'Not unless they have the husband's sanction,' he found, and the old lady, her eyes and lips consenting to any *sous-entendu* he might choose to attribute to the word, replied with a '*Précisément.*'

'And now, you know,' said Graham, still laughing, 'I must ask you to tell me no more engrossing stories for a little while; I can't do you justice and listen to you at the same time. — You will reward me for my industry and self-denial,' he added, seeing her face fall like that of a child reproved, 'by telling me, one by one, as the days go on, about all your admirers, sanctioned and unsanctioned.'

Madame de Lamouderie's mouth twisted to one side as it attempted to discipline its answering smile and she sat very silent indeed, while Graham, looking intently from her to his canvas, set down his lines and shadows. But silence, he soon realized, was to her a disintegrating element. Under his severely impersonal gaze she collapsed into a rather dreadful rigidity. Unless he let her talk he would not capture the meretricious drama, the tragic coquetry, the pitiful beauty of

her fluid face. This haggard old owl, drooping on its perch, was an incubus rather than an inspiration. Not more than twenty minutes passed before he smiled upon her and told her that now she could take up her reminiscences. His smile was reflected back to him like sunrise from a bleak, grey cliff.

'But may I not now come and look?' she begged.

'You'll see nothing yet,' he warned her.

But she got up and came, leaning on her stick, to stand behind him and look at the strange pattern, simple, forcible, significant, displayed on the canvas. She stood there then, speechless; unable to summon one word of flattery.

'Well?' Graham turned his head to smile at her.

'It is a marvel!' she gallantly brought out.

'Not yet. But it will be good.'

'It is a work of genius! In so short a time!' the old lady continued. — 'But — Dieu! — Am I so horrible as that?'

'Horrible!' Graham smiled his indignation. 'I call it already beautiful!'

'With the great black mark at the side of the nose; the black caverns under the eyes; the fissures in the neck! — *Bien!* It is so. I am old. I am horrible. You show me the death's head I am soon to be reduced to,' said the poor old lady with dismal acquiescence.

'But I shouldn't have cared to paint you if you hadn't been old. You are beautiful — in the way I care for — because you are old. You are like a silver medal exquisitely engraved by life; — every line shows what

it's given; what it's taken away. — And the ivory, black, grey of your colouring; what is the russet and pink of youth to compare to it? One looks at a young face as one does at a peach. It means nothing.'

'Ah; — it means something you wish to take into your hands; to bite into,' said the old lady, and her glance, half mocking, half provocative, drifted down and rested on him. 'Do not tell me that you are so disinterested in peaches. You are not an old man with all that life has taken from him showing in his face.'

'Oh, peaches are all right, in their way' — again she slightly disconcerted him. 'They are fit for biting into,' he said; 'but that's not an æsthetic occupation.'

Madame de Lamouderie, at this, gave a high, quavering laugh. 'Ah — we are not æsthetic, then, we women! To be bitten into! That is all we ask.'

Graham maintained, with calm, the decorum that his companion seemed determined to assail. 'Of course it is; quite rightly; while you are young. That is why you are so uninteresting when you are young except — if you will pardon me — from the point of view of appetite.'

He was calm; he was decorous; but he saw that he made the old lady very happy. She stood looking down at him, leaning on her stick; and no conversation could have pleased her better.

'You have bitten into many peaches?' she now inquired. 'You also will tell me of your histories?'

'I am a faithful husband, Madame,' said Graham,

with a certain dryness. 'Faithful husbands have no histories.'

'Ah, but seductive young painters — before they become husbands — before they are *rangés* — have them."

'A husband as happy as I am forgets them.'

She felt, perhaps, the dryness. '*Bien*,' she said, as though she committed a lesson to memory. '*Bien*. You are a very happy husband. You do not need to tell me that. I will ask no more questions about forbidden fruits.' And she went back to her chair.

'All these smudges, these marks you object to,' said Graham very kindly, 'are only exaggerated indications of shadows and outlines. They won't look like that when I begin to paint, I promise you. You'll be surprised, I promise you, when you see your portrait. The Sleeping Beauty will recognize her waking self.'

Shaking her head a little and again with the slightly twisted smile, the old lady said, '*Vous êtes charmant*.'

When Graham, an hour later, left the Manoir, the early evening was gathering, purpling the vistas of the chestnut forest. He smiled a little to himself, as he went, lighting a cigarette and thrusting his hands into his pockets; a tall, dark-headed figure, full of grace and power, moving swiftly through the evening. He saw his portrait — what it was to be; and already he could smile at that; already it was witty, cruel, beautiful, what he was doing. And he smiled in thinking of the old lady. What he had said of her to Jill, last autumn,

was true, comically true; though Jill would never know it. He did not dislike her; not at all; he even enjoyed watching her antics as he would have enjoyed watching a dappled panther at the Zoo, when the dinner hour approaches and it leaps restlessly about its cage. But the memory of her and of her smiles made him feel that it would be specially pleasant to see Jill again. He wanted a draught of that fresh spring water. And, deeper than the reaction from the panther in its cage, he knew, as he walked down the winding road, a sense of relief, of escape. He had not seen Mademoiselle Ludérac again.

So he went quickly. But at the cemetery walls he paused. He paused, looking up at them, and went round to the gates and stood there, with head bent, considering; and then went in. He did not glance to right or left as he threaded his way rapidly among the mausoleums and in a moment he had reached the unspoiled space of grass that sloped down to the forest.

There was the solitary grave and it glimmered as if with pale tapers. It was just as he had known it would be after seeing her daughter lighting them in the room where this Marthe Ludérac once had lived. He stood and looked down at the wreath of daffodils laid upon the foot and the three tall vases at the head, filled with the flames of spring; and the spell, the presence, fell so strongly upon him that he seemed to see Mademoiselle Ludérac standing there, on the other side of the grave.

Jill had spread their tea at the window opening on

the river. Tea was always an easy, pleasant ceremony on their wanderings and one never omitted. He and Jill had managed to make tea in the most unlikely places. Something about the pretty, domestic neatness of it all, the waiting caddy, the singing kettle, the plate of *petits beurres*, showed him that she had been confident of his return and as he went to her and kissed her he said: 'It *is* good to find you here.'

'Where else *should* you find me!' smiled Jill, looking up at him.

He kissed her again and ran his hand over her bright, short hair. 'Rather jolly, all the same, our life, isn't it, Jill?' he said.

Jill had been feeling depressed, had been thinking about England, but the mood was dispelled by Dick's loving gaze.

'I should rather say it was!' she replied. 'It sometimes almost frightens me to think how happy we are, when so many other people come such croppers.'

'Well, we're rather an exceptional couple, aren't we,' said Graham, going to his chair. 'We are exceptionally attractive, for one thing, so that it requires no effort for us to remain fond of each other. And we know how to arrange our lives, to cut out the inessential things that suffocate so many people, and to keep the essential. — Solitude; nature; work.'

Jill wondered what her work might be; but since, even at home, she had nothing that could accurately so be described, she only said: 'How did the portrait go? Was she pleased to see you?'

'Frightfully pleased. I've started well. Though it's difficult to keep her alive if one doesn't talk to her and flirt with her; but I manage it.'

'And Mademoiselle Ludérac? Did you see her?'

'Yes, I saw her.' Graham stretched across and took the cup of tea Jill gave him.

'Really and truly saw her? Not out of doors in a mackintosh and black shawl?'

'She was in a black apron, arranging the room.'

'*Is* she just a sort of housekeeper, then? Do tell me what you thought about her.'

'She's rather beautiful, I think,' said Graham. 'She has beautiful hands, and beautifully shaped shoulders.'

'And beautiful eyes. I saw them the other day. They seemed to be all I did see. They are the sort of eyes one could never forget. The sort one sees sometimes in a picture, that follow you, you know; as if they wanted to say something; and couldn't.'

'Well, I didn't notice her eyes.'

'Did you talk to her?'

'We exchanged a word or two. She was quite civil and correct. And she went up and got the old lady's cosmetics and painted her face for her. It was rather pretty to see. She's good to the old vulture.'

'Painted her! But how marvellous, Dick! How I wish I could have seen it. Like a big baby having its face washed?'

'Exactly. It was rather touching.'

'I'm glad you were touched, Dick. It's what you need, you know,' Jill assured him, smiling at him —

'with that queer, hard heart of yours. Mademoiselle Ludérac *is* lovely then. I felt she would be, from the very beginning; from the moment I saw her mother's grave.'

But to this Graham returned, and with an effect of sudden harshness, 'Well, for my part, I must confess that I found her rather repellent.'

CHAPTER IX

Family Histories

JILL, next afternoon, said that she would go up to the Manoir with him and see if Mademoiselle Ludérac would have a walk with her.

'But I'm not going up to-day,' said Graham. 'It's not raining. Yesterday was an exception. I'm going up the mountains this afternoon.'

'I'll go alone, then. The old lady won't turn me out even if you don't come with me.'

'She'll fall upon your neck. But as for the young lady, you'll fail in your enterprise there, I warn you.' Graham was cleaning his palette and spoke with cheerful detachment; or what sounded like it.

'How do you mean, fail?' asked Jill, pulling on her silk cap.

'She's not a malleable young person. Not at all eager to make our acquaintance. She doesn't at all identify herself with her old patron's vagaries.'

'I don't care. I shall find out a way. I'm quite determined to know her,' said Jill. So she started forth alone.

She took the road to-day and reached the Manoir; but her hopes were again frustrated, for Joseph told her that Mademoiselle Ludérac had gone out. However, there was the old lady.

Madame de Lamouderie was evidently waiting and

her disappointment in seeing Jill alone strove vainly to mask itself in delight. All the same, as Jill said to herself, half a loaf must be better than no bread; and, after a swift readjustment, the old lady was prepared to make the best of it. Her eye passed with its expression of avid attention over Jill's dress, new to her to-day, and charming in its tones of rosy cedar, its deft mingling of silks and wools.

'You are an incarnation of the springtime, Madame,' she told her. 'One understands your husband's devotion when one looks at you.'

'My husband's devotion!' Jill flushed a little, stared a little, and then laughed. That Graham should have expressed anything of his feeling for her to the old lady she knew to be impossible.

Madame de Lamouderie interpreted her silence as gratification. 'To see such a *ménage* restores one's faith in human nature,' she went on. 'You are too young, perhaps too innocent of life, to know how rare a thing it is for a wife, however captivating, to retain her husband's fidelity through years of marriage. But when I look at you, the miracle explains itself.'

'But we don't think fidelity a miracle in England,' said Jill, coolly if kindly. — 'I wonder if you'd mind my smoking?'

'Mind? Not the least in the world. My daughter also smokes. All fashionable women smoke nowadays, as I am well aware. — So. He has returned to his mountains. I do not blame him. Why should he care to look at an old woman when he can look at moun-

tains? He is a remarkable man, your husband, Madame; very remarkable. Full of power, charm, seduction. — But he is severe, too; very severe.'

'Dick severe? Do you think so?' And Jill laughed, leaning back her head, holding her cigarette lightly and looking from beneath her lashes at the old lady.

Madame de Lamouderie leaned forward with a mysterious smile. 'He frightens me,' she confided. 'I tremble before him!'

'But how horrid of Dick! What has he been doing?'

'He has done nothing,' said Madame de Lamouderie. 'It is I who do things: wrong things. I commit blunders. He makes me feel it.'

'I can't think of Dick as a mentor!' said Jill. 'You must snub him if he behaves badly. You mustn't let him frighten you.'

'Ah; it is easy for you to say so, young and beautiful as you are. If I could recover, if only for an hour, my lost youth, the tables might be turned, that I own!' said the old lady ruefully. 'As it is, his are all the advantages, and he makes me feel it. He does not come to-day because I have displeased him. I did not think so before; but it is clear to me now.'

'But you are quite, quite mistaken,' said Jill, and there was only kindness in her voice as she thus reassured her. 'I know you haven't displeased him. He'd have told me if you had. He's frightfully keen on your portrait, too. The only reason he hasn't come this afternoon is that it's such a splendid day for landscape.

You know he told you he could only come when it rained.'

'True,' said the old lady, looking fixedly upon her. 'True. I perhaps torment myself needlessly.'

'I'm quite sure you do,' Jill smiled upon her. 'And really you mustn't take Dick so seriously. You'll turn his head.'

The old lady shook hers. 'No. Ah, no; I shall never turn his head.'

'Well, you mustn't expect me to regret that, must you!' laughed Jill, and at that the old lady, eyeing her again, laughed also, saying, 'Ah, I see that you are witty, as he is. And you do not frighten me. I will come to you always when I fear that he means to be unkind.'

'Agreed!' said Jill. 'Between us we'll keep him in his place.'

'Tell me,' said the old lady, happily now, settling herself in her *bergère*, 'more about yourselves; more about him. You will forgive my insistence. I am a lonely old woman and never again shall I see people like you and your husband. He intrigues me; I long to understand him. What is his history? What is his family? Will you tell me? — as if to a child who begged for a fairy-tale?'

'His family? Well, he had rather an unhappy time with his family. His father and mother didn't get on at all.'

'They are still living?'

'She is; but Dick's father died when he was a boy.

He was Scotch; a clever Scotch journalist; very brilliant and excitable. I'm afraid he drank more than was good for him. Dick says it was because she made him so unhappy.'

'She was unfaithful to him?' Madame de Lamouderie suggested.

'Unfaithful! Dick's mother! Great Scott, no!' Jill had to laugh at the idea. 'She's a pattern of all the virtues. It was merely, I imagine, that his ways weren't her ways, and hers weren't his. He was a bohemian, and she was an American; of a very old family that she thinks a lot of. I always feel there's something to be said for her. She was only nineteen when she met him, on a steamer, when she was going back to America after being educated in a French convent. He was frightfully handsome and he carried her off her feet. But then he wanted her to stay off her feet, as it were; and she's not that sort of person. She needs to have her feet well on the ground. With as many roots as possible,' Jill laughed again, amused by her own simile. 'Well, she's got them now! She's married to a dismal, moth-eaten old baron and lives in a mouldy old *château* in Burgundy. And that is really what she likes. He's very *bien né* and *bien pensant*, and Dick's father was neither.'

'An American? Very rich, then? A millionaire?'

'Oh, no. She doesn't like millionaires. She likes old families. — American old families don't seem to mean much over here, do they?'

'They do not, indeed. One never hears of them. It

is only of the American fortunes one hears,' said the old lady earnestly.

'I know. Well, from our point of view she certainly has something of a fortune; and that gave her the advantage when it came to bringing Dick up. She could do everything with him she liked; and the father could do nothing. He liked to wander about Europe with Dick, and see all sorts of queer people and read, and loiter generally, while Dick painted. Dick loved being with him. And she liked to keep him with her in Paris and Cannes and make him behave politely to old French dowagers in her salon. He was delicate, too. So that gave her another advantage. You wouldn't think it now, to look at him; but his chest was weak and the doctors said he must live a great deal in the south. Even now he doesn't do all sorts of things that most men do. He rides, but he doesn't swim. He plays tennis, but he never played cricket. He's really lived very little in England, though he went to Cambridge. He was just finishing at Cambridge when the war broke out.'

The old lady's mind evidently remained attached to the more illustrious parent.

'He is fond of his mother? He is often with her? He goes out much *dans le monde?*'

'He's with her as little as he possibly can be! No, he's not fond of her. He makes the most dreadful fun of her. He's really unkind, I think, for she does adore him. She's rather beautiful, still, with great cold grey eyes and a great high nose. Dick always says she's all

nose and could smell out people's quarterings blindfolded!'

The old lady considered her. 'It is very unfortunate that a son should have so little reverence for his mother,' she observed.

'Yes. It is. But Dick hasn't any reverence for anything.'

'Ah; he is a rebel; a *libre penseur;* one sees it in his face. — But a mother! In our eyes that is something set apart; something not to be criticized.'

'I know. It's awfully sweet of you. We're not like that,' said Jill. 'Though I myself get on awfully well with Mummy.'

She was thinking, with something of amusement, and something of indignation, of the deadly, relegating kindness with which her mother-in-law would place the poor old lady. '*Déclassée,* my dear Jill; quite *déclassée,*' she would say, and Jill, who did not, as she would have said, give a hoot for the world, yet who had the shrewd sense of worldly values characteristic of her type, was well aware that such the old lady must be. It was apparent not so much in her situation as in her excesses and uncertainties of manner; her fumbling for an instinctive response that failed to come at a conscious bidding. Her innate pride, her innate dignity, still upheld her on the level way, as it were; but at an unexpected rise or fall of ground she tottered. 'Poor old thing,' thought Jill, lighting another cigarette and observing her hostess thoughtfully as she smoked; 'I'm glad we've come to make things a little

jollier for her.' And she had always, behind every impression of Madame de Lamouderie, the memory, like a breath of sweetness lingering on the air, of her awaking under Dick's hand. Poor, poor old Sleeping Beauty; for that there was one under all the folly and flattery she felt sure.

'Tell me,' she said after their little pause, and the talk of Dick's mother had brought another mother to her mind, 'were you a friend of Madame Ludérac's?'

Madame de Lamouderie had, perhaps, been brooding on the aberrations revealed in her idol, but the question recalled her, with an almost apparent shock. 'Madame Ludérac?' she repeated. 'Who has spoken to you of her?'

'Nobody,' said Jill, surprised but not disconcerted by the old lady's sharpness of tone. 'I saw her grave last autumn, in the cemetery, and it was so different from all the other graves that it interested me; especially after coming up here and seeing where she lived.'

The old lady was looking at her with the shock still on her face. Then, slowly, her expression softened and she sat meditating with deep gravity. 'No, I did not know her,' she said; but she said it gently.

'She died before you came to Buissac?'

'No; she died after I came; six years ago. I did not know her; but I saw her. She was mad,' said Madame de Lamouderie.

'Mad?'

'Yes. *Détraquée*. I am glad the people have not talked

to you. It is a sad history. It is sad for Marthe that it should be talked of.'

Jill was aware of feeling, for the first time, warmly fond of the old lady. 'No one has spoken to me at all. Would you rather not talk any more about it?'

'No,' said Madame de Lamouderie, after a moment. 'No; I do not mind telling you. You are not like those I mean: the vulgar rabble. She was mad; but it was the result of an accident; an accident to her head,' the old lady put her finger on her forehead above her eye. 'She was here for five years before her death; in Marthe's care. I first saw Marthe leading her among the woods; — she was hardly more than a child. It was terrible to see such a look on the face of a child. The mother leaned on her and she wore a black patch over her eye. She was as white as a ghost. All in black. *Dieu!* — it frightened me, the first time I saw them!'

It almost frightened Jill to hear her, and she remembered Dick's uncanny fear at the door after they had seen Mademoiselle Ludérac, white as a ghost — all in black — come round the corner of the house.

'But how wrong, how cruel, that such a thing should have been put on a child,' she said after a moment. 'Was there no older relation to help her?'

'No. No one. And the mother became frenzied if Marthe were not always beside her. They lived quite alone. They had no friends. All the village people feared the mad-woman and once stones were thrown at her and the child as they passed along the road.'

Madame de Lamouderie's face had sunken to such

gloom that Jill repressed her own exclamations of anger. She regretted having evoked such memories. Yet, at the same time, she felt what was almost a sense of joy. Her intuition, then, about Mademoiselle Ludérac was well founded. She was a wonderful person. More than before she resolved to know her. If the old lady was Dick's occupation, Mademoiselle Ludérac should be hers. She would make friends with the solitary, tragic girl. There might be, after all, a meaning for her in Buissac.

CHAPTER X

On the Island

WHEN she left the Manoir a little later, having promised the old lady that she would soon come again, Jill took the rocky hillside path and descended to the highroad. Standing there to lean on the wall and look down at the view, she felt that even without the promise of a new friendship one could hardly repine at a way of life that kept one in such places.

As she leaned there, her hand idly playing with the lichen-stained stones that crumbled on the parapet, Jill felt herself lifted and enfranchised by a sense of mysterious significance that came to her as much from the splendid scene before her as from the story of love and suffering she had just listened to. Life was like that, she mused, half consciously, while her gaze followed the grave, deliberate curve of the great river; it might break one's heart; but it was beautiful.

Her eyes, returning from the blue immensities of the horizon, rested on the island, and after that sweep round the universe it had a nested loveliness. It was a place for tranquil thought and compassed pacing, and Jill passed on through the gap in the parapet and down the rocky ledges of the little path till the bridge was reached and she found herself once more on the rich meadow-lands. She would explore the meadow

first, she thought, and she followed it to where, among rough bushes, saplings, and spits of sand, it ran out into the river. A little hut stood here with one tall tree growing beside it. A tethered goat was cropping at the thickets and Jill was enchanted by the sight of a family of grey wagtails — pale grey above, daffodil yellow beneath — disporting themselves with aërial flittings and jocund balancings in the shallows of the sandy shore. Then she walked back along the stream that divided her from the island, seeking a bridge over that. But there was none. To reach the island one had to round the projection of the promontory and return to the causeway, from where she could see Buissac, only half a mile away, lying tranquilly in the sunlight. Once reached, the island was a lovely spot indeed. It was lifted high above the meadow-land; high above the river. All the ground was covered with dense, bright grass that was soft under one's feet and among the straightly planted poplar groves one saw on every side the blue glimmer of water. The three white cows were picketed there, moving mildly forward, side by side. Jill went to the shore to look across the broad, swift current to the opposite bank of the Dordogne. Two waggons, drawn by cream-coloured oxen, were moving slowly along the road, piled with faggots, and a motor-car, small, vivid, glittering, looked like a dragon-fly skimming along the surface of the water. A row of motionless men, legs dangling, fished from a low wharf, and the voices of women kneeling at the water's edge to beat and knead their

linen came to her ears, sweetened by distance to a bell-like cadence. One felt, rather than saw, how broad the river was from hearing their faint voices. And over all shone the pale spring sunshine.

'No,' thought Jill, standing there, her hands behind her back, 'this is good enough.' To make up for anything, was the context in her mind. And it came to her that in loving it all like this, stupid, inartistic as she might be, she was sharing something of his deepest life with Dick.

As she turned from the river at last and entered one of the narrow aisles, she saw a tall black figure approaching her from the furthest end of the island.

For one moment she was seized by Dick's superstitious fear. The picture of the mad-woman the old lady had set before her returned to her mind and a presage of fate, inescapable, overwhelming, like Dick's tidal wave, curving its vast bulk above her. But in another moment the sense of loveliness that had been growing in her, ever since the old lady told her tale, dispelled dark visions. This was Mademoiselle Ludérac herself, and all the sights and sounds of the island had been the happy omens of their meeting. Jill stood and watched her as, all unaware, she came down the poplar grove. She was looking down at the grass; her head was bare, and she had a large white-and-grey cat in her arms. It was not until they were close upon one another that Jill went forward and Mademoiselle Ludérac then raised her head and saw her.

For a moment she stopped short. It came to Jill that if she had frightened them the other day it was possible that they had frightened her; but as she continued to smile blithely upon her, Mademoiselle Ludérac smiled back, and they met in the middle of the island, as if by an appointed plan; as if they had meant to meet and had sought each other at the trysting place. Without words, smiling, their eyes upon each other, they turned and walked back, side by side, towards the causeway. Introductions and explanations seemed quite unnecessary. 'It was meant to be like this,' Jill was thinking. And she felt that her sense of security was deep enough to sustain them both. Indeed, if Mademoiselle Ludérac were bewildered she did not show it.

'Do you often come here?' Jill asked.

'Yes; very often,' Mademoiselle Ludérac replied.

'I suppose the cows are Buissac cows. They couldn't get them down the path,' said Jill.

'No; they come from Buissac; by the road. But have you found your way here down the cliff?' Mademoiselle Ludérac questioned.

'Yes. And I've been up the cliff, too. We came by that way the other day.'

'Did you, indeed? It is known to very few strangers. It is a rough climb,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac, who kept her eyes upon Jill with a sort of gentle wonder.

Jill listened to her voice rather than to her words. It was as beautiful as her face, she thought. The depth and tranquillity of the river was in it; and the bell-like

cadence of far distances. It was a voice, Jill felt, that could only have grown under such a sky and beside such a river. 'Let us sit down for a little,' she suggested when they reached the dyke. And they sat down on the warm, sunny stones and Jill contemplated her companion for some moments of silence.

In her demeanour, her gestures, her tones — as Jill was later on to hear them — of abrupt command, her impetuous, un-self-conscious speech, Marthe Ludérac gave an impression of noble breeding, while something in her aspect recalled Madame de Lamouderie's allusions to peasant origins. There was an archaic simplicity in the straight lines of her body, the contour of her braided head; a directness a most primitive in her gaze. Her eyebrows lay far apart, set high above the clearly drawn dark eyes, and this spacious setting gave to these a striking potency and candour. She had the small straight nose of the Latin race, the small firm chin, the classic oval of brow and cheek. Her mouth in repose was austere and beautiful, but her smile revealed small white teeth and a space of gum above them, and had in it a sudden helplessness like that of a very young child. Her smile, Jill felt, from the view of beauty, was her defect; yet she would not have had it otherwise. It brought her near as nothing else in her appearance did; and contemplating her with absorbed attention, she felt her to be like a strange bird whose life is passed in high thick forests but that may, through one small, confiding habit, be tamed into one's hand. She looked back at Jill while

Jill thus looked at her, and her hand caressed the head of her cat.

'Does he go with you on all your walks?' Jill asked, glancing down at the massive, tranquil visage of the animal. 'He must be very heavy to carry.'

'No; he is only with me because he is a bad beast,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac, smiling. 'He knows that I do not want him and hides until I am well started and then I look down to find him there. He is not really heavy. I carry him easily. They are very like babies, animals, are they not? — and love to be dandled like this. — You are fond of them too?'

'I adore them!' said Jill, reaching out to scratch the head of the cat, which turned in sharp appreciation under her hand. 'What a battered warrior! You've been to the wars, poor old man, haven't you?'

'Yes; he is badly battered. His leg is broken, you see.' Mademoiselle Ludérac drew back her hand to show the distorted limb.

'What a shame! Was it a trap?'

'No; not a trap. He was chased by boys. They tied a saucepan to his tail and chased him with a dog. I was only just in time to save him. — One leg was broken by a stone, and the dog had bitten through the other.'

'Horrible little brutes!' cried Jill. 'Were you able to give them a hiding?'

'No; I was not able. I was occupied in running away with the cat,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac calmly. 'I do not know that it would have done any good to have beaten them.'

Jill allowed herself a smile. 'Yet you struck the curé!'

Mademoiselle Ludérac gazed, then flushed. 'I lost my temper on that day. You have heard of it?'

'I thought it splendid!'

'No; not splendid — stupid. If I had let her go at once she might have been saved.'

'You know — you won't mind my saying so — because I'm so fond of France,' said Jill, stroking the cat which had broken suddenly into thick, clotted purring — 'it seems to me that your people are not as kind to animals as ours are. I was Scout Mistress in our village — you've heard of Boy Scouts — before the war, and one of the things we teach them is kindness to animals. There are cases of cruelty, of course; but people, on the whole, do hate it and try to help against it. Whereas here in France, they may be devoted to their own Tou-tou or Minet, but they don't seem to have any sense of responsibility towards other animals. The streets of Buissac are full of starving cats and dogs. And they net the birds to eat, and I'm told that in France chained dogs pay no tax — only dogs at large; and that's why one sees and hears all those miserable animals. In England it's against the law to keep a dog chained up all the time. And I don't believe any English boys nowadays would chase a cat with a dog.'

Mademoiselle Ludérac was looking at her with deep, sad interest. She meditated a moment before she said: 'We are more backward than you in those ways.'

'But why don't people get together and do something about it?'

Mademoiselle Ludérac smiled dimly. 'People when they get together in France only do so to quarrel,' she suggested, and she went on, giving Jill a new sense of her maturity: 'There is little margin in a place like Buissac for kindness to animals to grow up. That is what I tell myself. I feel with you; — I feel all you say; — but it is what I tell myself, for I think of it all, perhaps too much. Life is so hard for our people. And they have so little guidance. The Church teaches them that the beasts have no souls and are placed here for our convenience. What I tell myself is that, as conditions become easier and thought more free, it must improve. Men have improved in their treatment of each other. In the past, not long ago, they were as cruel to each other as they now are to the animals,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac, and as her eyes fixed themselves on Jill with a look of suffering Jill remembered the old lady's story and the stoning of the mad mother with her child. 'To read history is to feel one's blood freeze, one's heart stop beating. They broke each other on the wheel; they burned each other at the stake. When people were mad, they were flogged and bound and often thrown to rot in horrible dungeons. When they had committed crimes, they were tormented and tortured before they were allowed to die,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac, a strange light in her eyes. 'I do not speak of times long past; not of the Romans who made a pastime of men's suffering, as many now

do of the sufferings of animals — but of quite recent days; of days within the memory of our grandparents.'

Jill was regretting her unguarded words. They had opened vistas that must have terrible associations for Mademoiselle Ludérac. 'Yes. That's all true,' she murmured. 'I'm sure what you say is true. It must all get better bit by bit.' She felt suddenly as if Mademoiselle Ludérac were far older than herself, and at the same time her yearning to shelter and protect her was almost maternal in its tenderness and comprehension.

Mademoiselle Ludérac sat silent for a time, slowly stroking the cat from which Jill, in listening to her, had unconsciously withdrawn her hand. She said presently: 'You are kinder, I know, than we are, in England. But even with you the change is not complete. I have read of cruelty in England, too. Little rabbits let out of boxes and torn to pieces by dogs. Stags and hinds — creatures framed for fear — such gentle, such lovely creatures — hunted until they take refuge, sometimes, in the sea; and even then not allowed to escape, but followed and dragged back and slaughtered. And foxes; — foxes who are almost like our dear dogs; so clever; so gay and charming; — there are many in our mountains here and I have seen them play with their cubs; it is the prettiest sight. Yet it is the great national sport of the English to hunt them with hounds and horses until they are so exhausted that they can drag themselves no further, and then the dogs fall upon them and tear them limb from limb.

Oh, no; we are cruel in those ways — as in all else; but you cannot say while such things are done in England that the English, too, are not cruel.'

Insensibly, in speaking, her voice had lost its tranquillity and, listening with a bewildered and sinking heart, Jill knew that tranquillity with Mademoiselle Ludérac was an achievement rather than a characteristic. Her words came now impetuously, rapidly, heaping themselves up, as her breath gave way at the end of each sentence, as though, Jill felt, she were about to break into tears. And her own distress, her own discomfiture was so deep, that, trying to gain time, trying to think out a way of escape, she began again to stroke the cat, so that her hand touched Mademoiselle Ludérac's and, looking up with those potent, those dwelling eyes, Mademoiselle Ludérac smiled faintly at her, asking pardon, it was evident, for so much intemperateness.

Jill found her voice at last. 'I've got something to tell you,' she said. She hardly knew how to bring out her confession. The context in which her beloved sport had been presented to her so bewildered her that she had difficulty in grasping the exculpations. 'You'll think I'm like all the others. I am, I suppose. — I hunt foxes,' said Jill. 'I've hunted them all my life.'

Mademoiselle Ludérac gazed at her with no change of countenance.

'I've always tried not to think about the foxes, because I'm not really cruel; at least I think not. I love

animals; I love those cubs, of course — and the foxes too, poor dears. But it is all so different. How can I explain it to you? There's nothing I've ever cared about as much as hunting. It's quite true. We all love it. We're born with the love of it in our blood.'

Mademoiselle Ludérac continued to gaze at her. She had faintly flushed; but she said nothing.

Poor Jill stumbled on. 'I suppose it's just a remnant of barbarism; but isn't that perhaps the excuse for it? Everything is so shut down and boxed in and built up nowadays and the old instincts in us need to be stretched out sometimes or they'll do us a mischief. Isn't it partly that? It isn't, I'm sure, the love of cruelty, or anything horrible; it's the love of the chase, and the risk and the excitement, and the darling hounds and horses, and being in the country all together; — sharing something splendid, all together.'

Mademoiselle Ludérac, gently, if automatically, stroking her cat, continued to give her, Jill felt, the benefit of complete attention. 'But is it not, in the end, the same as with the boys?' she said, after a silence had followed and grown long.

'The boys?'

'The boys who chase the cat.'

Jill stared. Then, under her sunburn, her colour mounted. 'Those hateful little brutes! Tying a saucepan to a poor cat's tail! Hunting it for the fun of seeing it run! That's not sport!'

'They hunt cats without the saucepan,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac, 'and is it not for love of the chase,

the excitement, and being all together? A boy alone will rarely hunt a cat. All I mean to say,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac, her impetuosity folded to the considering calm, 'is that I do not know why you feel them cruel if you do not feel yourself so. The hunted cat and fox have the same feelings, whatever the sentiments of those who hunt them.'

Deeply disturbed, deeply disconcerted and even humiliated, Jill sat gazing on the ground. Her companion did nothing to make the situation easier for her; but neither did she do anything to make it worse. She merely sat there in her meditative silence, looking before her at the river and stroking the cat. Jill was never to forget the face of that white-and-grey cat, its tranquil eyes and its security from harm.

'Well, I suppose you are done with me now,' she said at last, speaking in a tone so childlike in its ruefulness that Mademoiselle Ludérac looked round at her in surprise. 'You don't care to have anything to do with a person like me; — a person you think cruel; a person you would really like to beat, as I want to beat the boys.'

A smile flickered over Mademoiselle Ludérac's face. 'But I do not want to beat you.'

'You would if it would do any good.'

'Ah, yes; if it would make you wish to stop hunting foxes, yes,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac with her smile; 'I should certainly want to beat you then. But it would not. It is the same as with the boys. Beating does not help.'

Jill brooded. 'I do wish I could promise you I'd never hunt again. But I can't. It would be like promising one would never look at another sunset, or never smell apple-blossoms again. When the time came the temptation would be too strong. One would simply have to creep out and have a peep, or put one's face into the branch of apple-blossom as one ran past it in the orchard. — You see, you can't *really* understand if you've never done it; never been brought up to it. I'd sooner be hanged than see a fox vivisected. I'd fight for it! — You'll think me mad. But it's like that. All topsy-turvy.'

Mademoiselle Ludérac's smile, while she listened to this singular confession, had melted, insensibly, to its helpless, startled sweetness. Hers was the very look of one who bends his face to the branch of apple-blossom, breathing in the dewy intoxication of its innocent young fragrance. And something of the apple-blossom was in Jill's being, to be recognized by discerning eyes. She was wild and sweet, civilized and primitive at once.

'You do not persuade me, not at all,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac. 'But you seem to me very charming.' And as she said this she blushed suddenly. It was strange to her, disconcerting, that was evident, to find herself allured to such familiarities.

'Do I really!' cried Jill. Her deep sense of security in regard to her relation with Mademoiselle Ludérac flowered again. 'Then you aren't going to turn me down?'

'Turn you down?'

'Give me up? — Refuse to know me; — because of the foxes?'

'*Mais — chère Madame*' — Mademoiselle Ludérac faltered, but less now in confusion than uncertainty, 'you do not know me at all.'

'There's your mistake. I do. It doesn't take long to know some people — if one's got eyes in one's head. I know you better than you can possibly imagine,' Jill declared. 'And as a matter of fact, I was your friend before I ever saw you.'

'*Mais — chère Madame*' — Mademoiselle Ludérac repeated. And now it was indeed with confusion. All her French standards of decorum, rationality, measure, were, it was evident, disordered by the unprecedented situation in which she found herself. 'We have never spoken together before to-day. — I do not even know your name.'

'My name is Jill; — Gillian Graham,' Jill informed her, rising to her feet and standing before her, her eyes narrowed to their happiest smile. 'And yours is Marthe Ludérac. And though I can't promise to give up hunting — if I ever have another chance to hunt — I can promise that I'd do a great deal to please you. There. How's that for an offer of friendship?' And Jill stretched out her hand.

But Mademoiselle Ludérac sat still on the wall, taking her cat to her side. Jill thought it was to free her other hand for a responsive gesture. Then she saw her fold her fingers together — as if really to control a

first impulse, and then that she laid the hand, thus softly clenched, against her breast. 'But you do not know me,' she repeated.

'But if I don't, I want to,' said Jill, standing perplexed, with her outstretched hand.

'You are like a child, *chère Madame.* You grasp at something because it is new to you. My life,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac, and her voice had found its way to a deep conviction, 'is not one in which you could please yourself. We do not belong to the same world.'

'Damn worlds! What on earth has that to do with it! Do you mean you won't be friends with me because you're French and I'm English?'

'*Mais non! Mais non!*'

'Then why not? Is it because you're poor? So am I. But it can't be anything so silly as that.'

'You do not know what you are saying when you say that you are poor. But it is not that,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac, almost with severity, as though to the charming but stubborn child. 'I have no friends. My life has been too hard for friends. I have nothing to give a friend. You are kind, but romantic, *chère Madame,* to imagine otherwise.'

'Do you really mean you don't want to see me any more? All it comes to is that you don't like me!' cried Jill, amazed herself to feel how deep was the wound inflicted by this refusal.

But rising to her feet Mademoiselle Ludérac said quickly, her eyes darkened in their look of suffering,

'No, no — you must not say that. That is not like you. That is not kind. It is not that I do not wish to see you — do not like you. But can you not recognize yourself that what you ask is impossible? I am rooted here, deep, deep in the soil. I shall stay here, always. It is my home. You are a stranger, passing by. I shall not forget you. I shall always remember you. But that is not friendship. A friend is something that one keeps; — that one keeps always. A friend is part of one's life.' She turned when she had said this, and went before Jill over the causeway to the road. Jill, following, felt like the child rebuked, though so gently rebuked. She felt, further, that it was perhaps just that she should be rebuked. How immature, headlong, even glib, her assurance must have seemed, Mademoiselle Ludérac's words revealed to her. And yet; — under it all, she went on believing that Mademoiselle Ludérac was to be her friend. She believed it more than ever.

On the highroad Mademoiselle Ludérac paused. '*Au revoir, chère Madame,*' she said and she held out her hand. It might be in mere formality, yet some deep emotion strove with the schooled tranquillity of her regard.

'*Au revoir,*' said Jill, taking the hand and looking back at her quietly.

'I thank you,' Mademoiselle Ludérac then said in a low voice. 'I beg you to believe in my gratitude.' And she turned and walked quickly up the road.

Jill walked on towards Buissac. The central scene

of this strange encounter held her thoughts — the moment when Mademoiselle Ludérac had not responded to her offer of friendship. In the light of her last words, of her last look, that refusal took on a new significance, and, remembering how the beautiful hand had been withheld, 'She wanted to give it to me — and wouldn't let herself,' thought Jill.

CHAPTER XI

On the Balcony

JILL walked rapidly back along the river road with no eyes for the evening loveliness. She realized that tea-time was past when she saw Amélie sitting on the wall in front of the Ecu d'Or in an evening mood of unaccustomed leisure. Poor, hardly driven Amélie on this pleasant vantage-ground, swung one foot, as Jill used to swing hers, and watched with fond eyes the gambols of a shrill-voiced little girl who was playing in the road.

Jill paused to greet her. 'Has Monsieur come in?' she asked.

Monsieur had returned an hour ago, Amélie informed her, looking up at the generous *anglaise* with approbation.

'And he's probably had no tea, either,' said Jill. 'Well, we'll enjoy our dinner so much the more. What is there for dinner, Amélie?'

'*Ecrevisses;* and an excellent *blanquette de veau*, Madame.'

'Is this your little girl?' Jill inquired, looking down at the child who wore a large red bow at the top of its plain little head and showed very grimy drawers under its short petticoats.

'*Mais oui, Madame; c'est ma fille unique*,' said Amélie proudly. '*Viens, Germaine, dis bonjour à la*

dame.' But Germaine only scampered away on her hob-nailed little boots.

'She looks very strong and happy,' said Jill. 'I didn't know you were married, Amélie.'

'*Je suis fille-mère, Madame,*' said Amélie with an air of modest pride, as though the state were one of special merit.

'Hallo, you scoundrel! Where's my tea?' called Graham from above. He had come out on the balcony and leaned there looking down at them.

'Scoundrel yourself! Where's mine? — It's too late for tea; we are to keep our appetites for *écrevisses!*' Jill returned. 'Well, *au revoir,* Amélie. I must see if a box of chocolates will tempt Germaine to make friends with me.'

Jill, going up the stairs and thinking of poor ugly Amélie and of her complacency, laughed a little. 'But how right it all is — for them,' she thought. 'They've each got their own little badge; their own little medal or *pièce d'identité.* They all grow, deep, deep, on their own soil. *Grande dame; bourgeoise,* or *fille-mère.* They each know their own place and are proud of it, more than any other people in the world. If you can't have a legitimate child, then make the best of an illegitimate one. Quite right, too,' Jill laughed, feeling that Amélie had justified Mademoiselle Ludérac still further, and pleased that it should be so. All the same, should she tell Dick of her discomfiture, or be contented, in silence, with feeling it was all for the best? She debated the point as she went along the passage

and out to the balcony, but, as he turned his head and smiled at her, she felt, as always, that she must share everything with Dick, even discomfitures.

'Come. Sit down. Let's have a smoke and a talk,' she said, tossing her cap and gloves on a table; and when they had placed their chairs she said resolutely, 'Well, I've been snubbed.'

'By Mademoiselle Ludérac,' said Graham. He dryly smiled as he lighted his cigarette.

'Yes. She's been telling me, after we'd had the most wonderful talk, that we can't possibly be friends because friends must be parts of one's life, and that as we are going, while she stays, we can't be parts.'

'Did she include me in this rejection?' Graham inquired. 'That would be rather uncalled for, since I've made her no offers.'

'No; of course she didn't include you. And of course I've been an ass; trying to rush things. But you'd be just as keen as I am, I'm sure; if you knew all I know now.'

'Should I? What do you know?' And as Jill wondered where she should begin, Graham added, 'Where did you see her?'

'On the island. That was so wonderful, too. It all goes on being like the fairy-tale, Dick; but with something so much deeper in it than a fairy-tale; — except that fairy-tales *are* deep,' mused Jill, looking away for a moment over the river. 'I went down after being with the old lady, and there she was, walking under the poplars with a cat in her arms; just like the patron

saint of Buissac, you know. What were those picture books one had when one was a child? — Boutet de Monvel's *Jeanne d'Arc*, and *Chansons de France;* it was like those. Everything was pale; the sky and the trees and the river; even her black dress looked pale; and she was bareheaded, like the little Jeanne d'Arc. It was so queer, so beautiful. And she's had a saint's life, really. That came out in what the old lady told me. Her mother was mad, Dick.'

'Mad?' As she had echoed the old lady's word so Dick now echoed hers.

'Yes. But it was an accident. — I mean — Mademoiselle Ludérac isn't *détraquée*, too. It was an accident and she wore a black patch over her eye and was very white and dressed in black. And she walked about the woods leaning on Marthe's arm. That was the way the old lady first saw them. — What's the matter, Dick?' Graham was looking at her strangely.

'Hadn't that woman who came round the house the other day a black patch over her eye?' he asked, and it was odd to hear how dry he kept his voice as he asked it.

'Why, Dick! — how absurd you are! What tricks your imagination does play you! That was Mademoiselle Ludérac herself, and I saw her two beautiful eyes as plainly as I see yours.'

'Yes. Of course you did. Of course I'm a fool. — But I seemed suddenly to remember, as you said it, that I'd seen it all before.'

'That's the way it works with you, my dear boy.

You really must take care,' Jill smiled at him tenderly, 'or you'll get barmy.'

'Not with you to take care of me,' Graham smiled back. 'Go on with your story. You're full of it, I see.'

'Well, I don't want to upset you.'

'Upset me? I'm not upset,' said Graham. 'I'm only interested in the tricks my imagination can play me. Go on, Jill.'

'Well, the mother couldn't bear to be without her and fell into frenzies if Marthe left her. — Imagine what a life for a child, Dick. — And they were stoned once, here, in Buissac. That is like a saint, too, isn't it?'

Graham kept silence.

'It explains everything; everything one felt about her from the first,' said Jill. 'The grave — mad people are buried alone like that, perhaps; — and her coldness to you. And the feeling she gives one that she is set apart. She told me that she had never had a friend.'

Graham determinedly reacted against his impressionable mood. He tossed away his cigarette and lighted another and inquired, 'Does it really make her more amiable that she should have been so very unfortunate? It seems to me that the old lady has shown a good deal of courage in taking up such an unpopular person. I shouldn't have expected it of her, somehow. It makes one like her better. But it doesn't make me like her *protégée* the better that she shouldn't count her as a friend.'

'Well, she doesn't seem like a *friend*, exactly, does she? though I could see that she was dreadfully upset over Marthe and her mother. She's a patroness rather than a friend.'

'All the same, Mademoiselle Ludérac sounds to me, and looks to me, like a very hard young person.'

'You wouldn't have said so if you could have seen her holding that cat and talking about animals this afternoon. — And about history, and how cruel people had been to each other. — Oh, Dick, it's very, very strange; — but she makes me feel things I never felt before. She made me feel it was cruel to hunt foxes.'

'Did she indeed. Confound her cheek!'

'It wasn't cheek. — And you don't think so yourself, though you have got a prejudice against her. — She's gentle — gentle — and dreadfully sad. It's as if she'd been through everything and come out on the other side. I can't explain. You'd feel it even more than I do if you were with her, because you are cleverer and deeper than I am. I know I'm right about her. — She gives me the feeling I've had sometimes when I've been out at dawn; — everything so still and just one star and a thin little moon in the sky. — When she looks at you she makes you feel like that. And she seems to be seeing much more than just yourself. She seems to be seeing something that explains you. She might not be able to show it to you; but when you're with her you feel it's there. And she makes you long, more than anything, to be the self she's seeing. It's like heaven, you know.'

Dick was looking at her tremulous, lighted face as though he, too, were seeing it with that deeper vision. 'You're a darling, Jill,' he said.

He had put out his hand to her and she took it, murmuring, 'She does upset me.'

'She upsets us both a little, perhaps, in different ways. Black magic with me, and white with you. No doubt she's a remarkable young woman; but it's you who are the darling. You lend her all the poetry that's in yourself.'

'Poetry! In me, Dick!' Jill had to laugh though his words had brought unaccustomed tears to her eyes.

'You've been an embodiment of poetry ever since you began to talk about her. Your state of mind is poetry. — You're a queer people, you English, Jill. Here you are, a hard-headed, matter-of-fact, unimaginative, hunting girl; yet, give you a chance, push aside the woodland stone, and it's the well of English poetry that bubbles up out of the moss. There's always a skylark waiting to sing in your sky. — She may be the silent sky, Jill; — but you are the sky with the skylark in it.'

Jill gazed at him and she murmured, 'Great Scott, Dick!' He made her extraordinarily happy. And he made her sad, too. Was it like the great landscape that afternoon, with the sense it brought of the accepted tragedy in all beauty? No, not quite that. The moment, as she sat there, holding Dick's hand, meeting his loving gaze, was beautiful and not to be forgotten; but Dick was sad. There was something

autumnal in his look; something of remembrance. Like an autumn day, thought Jill, when one tries to capture and hold fast the beauty that is vanishing out of the world; so that when winter comes one shall not forget.

CHAPTER XII

The Evening Party

GRAHAM and Jill were having their *petit déjeuner* next morning, each in their little bed and each — a special favour of Madame Michon's — with their own tray, when Amélie brought in a letter from the Manoir and told them that Monsieur Trumier waited below for an answer.

'At this hour! What time can they get up!' Jill exclaimed. Graham said that the old lady had probably written from her bed.

The letter was very ceremonious. It asked if they would give Madame de Lamouderie the great pleasure of spending the evening with her. It was, as they would know, a poor hospitality she had to offer, but their kindness would overlook deficiencies and Mademoiselle Ludérac had promised a performance on the harp. Mademoiselle Ludérac, she reminded them, was a professional, and they could not fail to be pleased by her proficiency. It was signed in full panoply: '*Veuillez agréer, Madame, l'expression de mes sentiments les plus distingués.* COMTESSE DE LAMOUDERIE.'

It was difficult to believe, Graham reflected, that it was written by the old lady who talked about biting into peaches.

'Isn't it grand!' laughed Jill. 'And why not have asked you when you went up to-day?'

'She isn't sure I am going up to-day, and I'm not, as it happens. It's not raining.'

'Oh, poor old dear; that's two days without you. She'll think you've given her up. You must be specially sweet to her to-night, then. — For of course we'll go, won't we? I long to hear Mademoiselle Ludérac play the harp.'

Jill spoke in English, but Amélie, who waited at the door, volunteered at this that Mademoiselle Ludérac was *très forte* on the harp; one could hardly go past the Manoir without hearing her.

Jill said that they must wear their best bibs and tuckers; and though the evening brought a sudden fall of rain, she still insisted on this tribute to the old lady's hospitality. 'Nothing would please her so much. I'll manage to get the car up the road,' she said.

So, watched with great interest by the personnel of the Ecu d'Or, they crept under the raised hood at eight-fifteen, Graham with the collar of his coat turned up about his ears, Jill wrapped in her furs. The rain rattled on the hood as they sped along the highroad and in the chestnut forest the long, adventurous beam they cast before them brought happy fancies to Jill's mind. What spells of loneliness and melancholy could withstand the gaiety and enterprise of a modern car? 'I'm much more like a car,' she thought, 'than like a skylark; — and a car can do something for Marthe Ludérac; — take her away, perhaps, who knows? — while a skylark can do nothing.'

In the narrow, upper road, the stones were loosened

by the rain and torrents poured down the ditches on either side. It required all Jill's skill and hardihood to drive without mishap; but the car purred softly on, pausing, meditating, tacking carefully from side to side, and soon the Manoir lights showed orange-coloured squares among the sycamores; for to-night the Manoir had opened its eyes to look at them.

Joseph was at the door as they drew up. There was a lamp in the hall and a lamp on the high turn of the stair. One saw for the first time the acanthus-leaf moulding of the cornice and the flat, dry greens and fawns and umbers of the battle-piece hung on the wall. Joseph still wore his checked trousers, but had on, over them, a correct, if moth-eaten, tail coat, and his white tie was starched and immaculate. In his eye, as he helped them off with their coats, Jill thought that she detected a glint of melancholy pride. For Joseph, too, this was a great occasion.

The pale green drawing-room, all enclosed and luminous, gave Jill the strangest feeling. To step into it was like entering the tank of an aquarium, like sinking away from life and change into timelessness. Though lighted, it was dense — the tall lamp near the alcove, the three pairs of candles, on piano, bookcase, and mantelpiece, only lending, as it were, transparency to the aqueous medium. The daffodils, in their symmetrically placed vases, looked like submerged flowers, and so dim and dazzling was the scene that, for a moment, one hardly saw the figure of Madame de Lamouderie standing among the flowers and candle-flames.

She was alone. The harp, unveiled, glimmered in a corner, but Mademoiselle Ludérac was not there; and, like a stately, furbelowed old fish, their hostess glided forward, her manner majestically attuned to the significance of the occasion. How many years was it since she had given an evening party? How many years, Jill wondered, since she had worn that looped and flounced silk skirt, that tightly fitted bodice trimmed with jet? Bravely *décolleté* in its original state, friendly fingers had adjusted the black net sleeves and black lace tucker and tied the velvet bow under the old lady's ear. She held a fan with broken, gilded sticks, her festive head was draped with the lace mantilla, and, in the monotonous room, her painted lips were like a brilliant flower.

'*Charmée — charmée de vous voir*,' she murmured, in the odd, mincing tones that Graham had heard from her before; but the artifice broke down; the currents of her delight swept all ceremony from her voice. '*Vous êtes bons! Vous êtes charmants!*' she exclaimed. '*Et Dieu! — que vous êtes beaux.*'

They had each taken her by a hand and, thus held, she looked at them, and over them, with lustrous eyes. '*Que vous êtes beaux*,' she repeated.

'*Et que vous êtes belle*,' said Jill. — 'Isn't she marvellous, Dick?'

Graham bent his high, dark head, and kissed the old lady's hand.

'Ah, *infidèle!*' she said, and her voice trembled; 'here are two whole days that you leave me disconso-

late! Two days, empty; desolate; but for the charity of this adorable creature.'

'But it's when it rains that I come to you,' said Graham.

'And it never rains in Buissac!' cried the old lady. 'Never! never! I see that I shall come to curse the sunlight!'

'It's raining now,' said Graham. 'And have you forgotten your great floods?'

'You make me forget everything! You turn my head!' Madame de Lamouderie retorted. 'Sit here; sit beside me,' she went on. 'No; I jest. I do not expect you. I have too little to offer you; I know it well. In my old happy days I could have entertained you differently. Princes, diplomats, poets, all that Europe had to give, would have bowed in my salon over your little hand, *ma chère petite;* and all the most beautiful women of the court of the third Napoleon would have been mad with love of this wicked husband of yours. — Yes, he is wicked!' She threatened him with her fan. 'Does one not see it in his eyes?'

'I'm thankful we *didn't* know you then!' laughed Jill. 'I don't want beautiful women to be in love with him!'

'Ah; you need have feared nothing from them; nothing,' Madame de Lamouderie declared while her eye travelled ravenously over Jill's dress. 'Their despair would have been a further tribute laid at your feet. — This is the first time I have seen you with your head uncovered. — Oh, the thick russet hair cut short! It

is terrible to see; yet it becomes you. It gives you a provocative, a boyish aspect. And the beautiful bare arms; — and the breast so white under the sunburned throat. Your eyes are blue, are they not? — Though now, in this light, they seem so dark.'

'Bluish grey. Quite ordinary eyes' — laughed Jill, a little embarrassed by this inventory. 'I see the harp is ready. When does the concert begin?'

'Oh, the concert does not begin until we ask for it. — Not until we have talked; and had our coffee. — Marthe prepares the coffee now.'

'Did she tell you that we met, at last, yesterday?' asked Jill, seeing that the old lady's joyous mood tonight included her *protégée*. 'I was so glad. I liked her so much.'

'Yes. She told me. She told me that you had been charming to her; and to her cat. You must not turn my poor Marthe's head, *chère amie*. A humble little teacher of music; a simple little *bourgeoise*. It would not be kind to give her hopes you could not fulfill.'

'But it's she who's turned *my* head!' cried Jill, and she forgot discretion. 'I don't think she's a bit humble. I think she's wonderful. She's the most wonderful person I've ever met.'

At this large statement, Madame de Lamouderie sat for a moment silent. 'Wonderful?' she then repeated in a small, low voice.

'Yes.' Jill was now resolved to rub it in. 'Wonderful and beautiful. Dick thinks so too, don't you, Dick?

— You might as well talk of turning the moon's head.'

The old lady turned grave eyes on Graham. 'You think her beautiful?'

'I don't know about beautiful; but she's like a Saint Cecilia,' said Graham, and Jill looked at him gratefully.

'A Saint Cecilia?'

'Yes. With her harp, you know. A saint and a Roman lady. That's what she made me think of the other day.'

'But Marthe is not a lady. She is a teacher of music,' said poor Madame de Lamouderie.

'Well, I only said she looked like one, you know,' Graham observed, and Jill, troubled, saw that he was more intent on tormenting his old friend than on praising Mademoiselle Ludérac. 'Just as I look like a gentleman, though I'm only a painter.'

'Only a painter! You are of an incomparable distinction! — You are a genius; a great genius!' cried the old lady, deeply perturbed, 'and genius ennobles. It is not the same as a poor, small *métier*, like giving lessons on the harp for hire. And Marthe is *bourgeoise* in birth; almost peasant. I feel the peasant too much at times.'

'Well, saints have been peasants,' Graham continued, with a cruel blitheness, to corner her.

'But Marthe is not a saint! You are idealists, dreamers, to think so! She has a very violent temper! As I have found to my cost!'

'All real saints have bad tempers,' said Graham, 'especially when they are faced with such sinners as you and me. How else are they to deal with us?'

At this Madame de Lamouderie gazed at him in an uncertainty half painful, half delicious. Pain predominated. 'But she has not dealt with you? You have not met her? You were not with her on the island?'

'No; I've not met her. I've given her, as yet, no grounds for dealing with me,' said Graham, slowly laughing. 'That you often have, I'm sure you'll own if you search your conscience!'

Gazing fixedly at him, the old lady was as suddenly reassured as she had been dismayed. 'Ah, you play with me! You love to mock and play! Was I not right to say that you were wicked? I too, let me warn you, have my malice! Perhaps you will feel it one day!'

'I've felt it already. We are well matched,' said Graham.

The door now opened and Mademoiselle Ludérac herself appeared. She was carrying a tray of cakes and Joseph followed her with the coffee, set out with much stateliness in tall white-and-gold china.

Graham rose and went to help her. '*Merci; je vous remercie*,' she said. But she kept the tray and placed it herself on the table beside the stereopticon. She wore a thin black dress of a bygone fashion, the long skirt giving to her figure a Byzantine elongation; and her face and throat and arms showed as pale as silver in the unearthly light.

She stood then, at the table, handing Joseph the cups to pass as she poured them out and Graham, again asking permission to make himself useful, followed with the cakes. Jill fancied that she saw in Dick's demeanour a touch of ironic formality; but if Mademoiselle Ludérac saw it, too, she gave no sign of discomfiture. She remained calm, punctilious, aloof.

When Graham had returned to his chair beside Madame de Lamouderie, Mademoiselle Ludérac came with her cup and sat down by Jill on one of the little satin sofas. Despite the rigours of the day before, Jill felt that their relationship had, insensibly, advanced in intimacy. Mademoiselle Ludérac looked at her very gently, and as Jill's frank eyes met hers her lips suddenly parted in their helpless, childlike smile. She could not conceal, since Jill was so glad to see her, that she, too, was very glad to see Jill.

'It pleases you to come to our little entertainment?' she asked, casting a glance towards the old lady, who eagerly conversed.

'It's perfectly enchanting. — Was it your idea?' asked Jill.

'Mine? Oh, no; I am not a hostess. It is Madame de Lamouderie's. And how much pleasure you and your husband have given her, you can perceive.'

'Yes,' Jill glanced at Graham and his old friend; 'isn't it wonderful, at her age, to be able to care so much? With most old people one feels that one can do nothing for them, except try to make them com-

fortable; whereas with her what one can do is to treat her as if she were young.'

'It is true; comfort, with her, counts for very little compared to life,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac.

Her eyes were travelling over Jill's face and dress as she spoke, not ravenously, as the old lady's had done, but as a child might gaze, in spring, at a bank of primroses.

'Do you like my dress?' Jill asked, interpreting the soft, surprised pleasure; 'I got it in Cannes this winter. I didn't expect to need it again till I was back in England.'

'It is beautiful, most beautiful!' said Mademoiselle Ludérac. 'Like the petals of a rose. And all complete; the rose-coloured stockings and the little silver shoes. No; Buissac has never indeed seen such a picture.'

'How would you like to wear a pink dress and silver shoes?' asked Jill. 'They would become you.'

'Me? Oh, no!' Mademoiselle Ludérac was amused by the incongruous idea. 'Not for me, such toilettes. Even if I were not too old.'

'Too old? I am older than you are!'

'Impossible, Madame!'

'How old do you guess me to be?'

'You look not over twenty-one.'

'I'm twenty-nine,' Jill informed her. 'And I guess you to be twenty-five.'

'But it is extraordinary. You have the face of twenty-one.' Mademoiselle Ludérac gazed at her. 'So fresh, so untouched. Yes; I am twenty-five, and

a little over; twenty-six, to be exact. So you are my senior.'

'Very much your senior. I am an old married woman! I have been married for years and years!'

'Have you indeed?' Mademoiselle Ludérac glanced at Graham.

'Five whole years. And I think when one's happily married it seems to have been for ever. One can't remember oneself not married, as it were.'

'That would bear out the pretty belief that happy marriages are made in heaven,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac with her smile.

It came to Jill, then, how unlikely it was that Mademoiselle Ludérac would ever be happily married; it was as unlikely as that she would ever wear a pink dress and silver shoes. Poor French girls, who had no friends, did not get married. Yet how redeemed from its desolation would the Manoir not have been could Marthe Ludérac have married and had a young family about her.

'Did you live here always when you were a child?' asked Jill, carrying on her thought. 'Were you a country girl like me?'

'We always came here for the summers,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac, and, though her gaze remained as gentle and as steady as before, Jill saw that it was altered. 'But I lived, too, in Angoulême.'

'In Angoulême! That wonderful old city, with the cathedral on the hill and the terrace looking over the plain!'

'You know it? Yes.' Mademoiselle Ludérac continued to gaze, but her look was now definitely troubled. 'That was my winter home. But I did not love it as I did Buissac.'

'Have you always studied the harp?' Jill changed the subject, seeing that it had been inapt. 'Did you study in Angoulême?'

'No; I was too young then. My mother taught me when we came back to live here,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac.

Jill again turned aside; Mademoiselle Ludérac could not wish to dwell on that tragic figure. 'I've never heard the harp played as a solo instrument. I suppose you love playing?'

'Yes, indeed.'

'And giving lessons?'

'That depends on the pupil. What I enjoy most,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac with an air of relief, 'is playing with other instruments; with an orchestra. It is then that the harp can speak with its own voice; for there is little music written for it as a solo; only arrangements; such as I will play you to-night; — if you care to hear.'

'But it's what we've come for; to hear you. — You play at concerts, then? You must be frightfully good.'

'I am not so very good. But I have engagements sometimes, in the winter. It is my greatest joy — to play with the orchestra,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac, and she added, her relief in having left the theme of her past carrying her into a girlish spontaneity —

'Last winter I played in César Franck's "Psyché." Do you know it?'

'I've never heard of it even. Is it lovely?'

'It is celestial music,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac, and in the little pause that followed these words, her eyes, with their wide setting, resting upon Jill, made her think not so much of the dawn as of the hour before the dawn; remote, windswept, starry.

Graham, though he talked so briskly with his old lady, had evidently been lending an ear to their conversation, for he now looked round at them to say: 'When does the concert begin?'

'Ah, he is wicked, wicked, this husband of yours!' Madame de Lamouderie addressed Jill. 'He delights in turning all my best sentiments against me.'

'*Le diable dans votre bénitier*, am I not?' said Graham. 'Come; you must let me hear a little César Franck; that will exorcise me.' He rose and strolled over to the sofa where Jill and Mademoiselle Ludérac sat.

Jill always liked Dick best of all in his tweeds; perhaps because, oddly enough, he looked less like an artist in them than in his evening clothes. His significance was exaggerated rather than effaced by evening dress, and with his rough hair and dark, compelling face, he was arresting and even overwhelming. So, evidently, the old lady had found him; he had gone like wine to her head; and Jill wondered, glancing at Mademoiselle Ludérac as he stood there above them, whether she did not find him overwhelming too. Her

expression, in seeing him approach, had changed; but it did not seem to be in any admiration. It was rather, Jill felt, as though there were a kind of instinctive hostility between them. That might simply be because, to a French girl, unused to social life, the presence of any man was intimidating. But she did not look at all intimidated. And Dick most certainly was not black magic to her. Nor was she so to him. That was all Dick's nonsense, thought Jill, glancing up at him and seeing how cold and firm was the gaze he fixed on the young woman.

'Shall I begin, Madame?' Mademoiselle Ludérac inquired, looking over at her patroness.

'Ah — if our guests wish you to; — by all means, begin; begin, I beg of you!' cried the old lady. 'She plays divinely! — I asked her to play to-night knowing that it was the only offering I could make to you. — Great critics have lauded her; — you cannot deny it, Marthe! — With time she will be famous, and you will be glad to think that you heard her on the threshold of her career. — She is a marvel! a marvel!' cried the old lady, while Mademoiselle Ludérac, who had risen and gone to her harp, stood making no comment on these extravagances.

'Here; come and sit beside your *bénitier*,' Madame de Lamouderie continued, motioning Graham back to his chair. 'It is not well to be too near the harp. Ours is the best place. It is a very penetrating instrument. — My mother played the harp when I was a child — and sang; — like Corinne. Madame de Staël, indeed,

was a friend of my grandmother's; — a witty, but a very ugly woman; how she should have attracted so many lovers remains a mystery; and I have always suspected that they would have preferred the attachment to remain platonic! My mother had the most beautiful arm in Europe, and perhaps she chose the instrument for that reason. It displays the arm as no other does. — I saw a woman play the flute once! *Bon Dieu!* what a spectacle! Her mouth all twisted to one side and her eyes squinting down her nose as though she were endeavouring to perceive a smut upon it! She was already *laide à faire peur*, however — like Madame de Staël — so it was of little consequence. Begin, then, my child; begin! We are ready for you! But let it be something romantic, passionate. — Not any of your mournful religious elegiacs.'

CHAPTER XIII

The Harp

JILL had followed Mademoiselle Ludérac to the other end of the room. 'I shall sit here, to be near you while you play. A little place all to myself,' she said.

The room was L-shaped and in the alcove-like turn there was a small table set with daffodils. Jill drew a chair to it and sat down. From here she could see Mademoiselle Ludérac in profile and look down the long room to watch the effect of the music upon Madame de Lamouderie and Dick. They seemed suddenly a long way off; Dick sitting there and nursing his foot across his knee, and the figure of the old woman, ravaged, absurd, yet beautiful, leaning forward to look up at him.

Mademoiselle Ludérac was tuning the strings of her harp, her head laid against them, and Jill's eyes were drawn to a portrait that hung above the daffodils on the inner wall of the alcove. It was evidently an enlarged photograph, a three-quarter length of a little girl, tinted, and framed in an oval gilt frame. The child was dressed in the elaborate white muslins of the eighties; blue knots of ribbon perched on her shoulders, a blue sash around her waist, a blue bow tied on the summit of her head. Her golden hair was cut across her forehead and long golden curls, disposed, one felt, by a proud maternal hand, fell about her small

decorated body. The face was a rounded, nondescript child-face with something at once sweet and sullen in the expression of the mouth; but the dark eyes held Jill's attention. Resentful, mournful, unchildish eyes, set so unevenly (one seeming with its heavy gaze to sink into the cheek and one to rise, plaintively, into the temple) that they made her think of the suffering, uneven eyes of Eleanora Duse whom she had once seen act. Suddenly, as she looked, she realized that this must be Mademoiselle Ludérac's mother in childhood, and it almost frightened her to see her there. She moved her chair so that she should not face the portrait. She had found no resemblance in it, yet had had time to feel, in those dark eyes, a familiar, a tragic potency.

Mademoiselle Ludérac had tuned her harp to her satisfaction and was now seated in the majestic pose, foot outstretched to the pedal, arms laid along the strings, that the playing of the instrument involves. She glanced at Jill, and there was something dark, preoccupied in her expression.

'She must have seen me looking,' thought Jill.

'Passionate? Romantic?' Mademoiselle Ludérac addressed Madame de Lamouderie. 'That might be a Chopin Nocturne, then. But shall we begin with a Mozart Sonata?'

'Yes; by all means. He is cheerful, light-hearted, Mozart. There was a picture of him as a child in a room at my home; a small boy, at the harpsichord, with powdered hair. Ah, there are no such musicians now-

adays.' And the old lady sighed, perhaps dismissing an impulse to claim Mozart as a *protégé* of her family's. Mademoiselle Ludérac bent her head against the harp for a moment, and Jill felt that in the power and sustenance of her communion with it she put aside the discords of her life. Then her fingers swept the strings, and the bright, unearthly tones filled the air with magic. In her corner, Jill listened spell-bound. This was unlike any other sound, with the heart-plucking depth of its bass, the thin clarity of its treble; it was all depth and light; like golden fruits falling into deep translucent water; and the form of the music came to her metamorphosed into the visual aspects about her; the daffodils reflected in the mirrors, the candle-flames all steadily pointing upwards, the watery greys and greens of the room, Marthe Ludérac herself, with her intent, dark head, her rhythmic, silvery arms. It was a golden magic, and it dispelled the sadness that, for a moment, had filled Jill's heart. It made one strong again; serene and confident. It was beautiful to see and hear and she could not distinguish the two beauties.

'Ah, bravo! Marvellous!' cried the old lady when all three movements had been played. 'Beautiful indeed; — but too long. — Let it be Chopin, now, Marthe. — Chopin is my passion. My mother knew him well; he wrote one of his symphonies under her inspiration!' cried the old lady flown with excitement. Even Jill knew that Chopin wrote no symphonies; but Dick made no comment on the absurdity.

The starlit melancholy of a Nocturne flowed from Mademoiselle Ludérac's fingers. Tears, languor, protestation, a folding, cloud-like acquiescence were in it, and Jill saw that she seemed to yield herself to it, yet to hold herself aloof; resolute and dispassionate.

'Ah, it breaks one's heart, that music!' cried Madame de Lamouderie. 'It makes one wish to weep all the tears of one's body.' She looked at Graham; but he was not listening to her. From under gloomy brows he gazed at Mademoiselle Ludérac. The old lady laid her fan against his arm. 'Does it not break even your hard heart, Milord Byron?'

Dick looked round and down at her; coldly. It was still as if he did not hear her, though he smiled response.

'My heart? — It does something to me. But Chopin leaves my heart intact.'

'What experience is there that does not leave your heart intact! You are of stone! — Of cold, hard marble!'

Graham still smiled, but he made no reply and Jill saw a shade of dissatisfaction cloud the old lady's radiance.

'Is that enough?' Mademoiselle Ludérac glanced over at them again.

'Oh, no! Not nearly enough!' cried Jill, and Graham said, looking at Madame de Lamouderie and not at their musician: 'May we hear some César Franck?'

'But by all means! César Franck, Marthe. He is dreary; like a consecrated wafer; beneficent, perhaps;

but insipid. Marthe, however, would ask nothing better than to play him all the night!'

'Oh, do go on all night!' laughed Jill. 'We'd ask nothing better, either, would we, Dick!'

'No,' said Dick, holding his foot across his knee and looking at Mademoiselle Ludérac; 'we wouldn't.'

'I play very little of César Franck for solo. You will not have to listen all night,' Mademoiselle Ludérac smiled at Jill. 'This is a voluntary for the organ; yet the harp will take it.'

It was, indeed, over all too soon, strange and lovely, like a fleeting glimpse of the fields of paradise — like paradise, Jill felt, seen through a veil of ice. Perhaps only so could one see it. 'Oh, that's best of all!' she cried.

'Do you know Gluck's "Orféo"?' Mademoiselle Ludérac asked, while her fingers swept the magically singing, magically sighing strings. 'That is like heaven, too.'

'Oh, play it, do,' said Jill. 'I only know *Chê faro*.'

'I will play that; first the Elysian fields, and then the lament of Orféo for his lost Eurydice.'

Was it like heaven, Jill wondered, listening to the far-away, trance-like measure? She closed her eyes and seemed to float in dreams. Gliding fields of asphodel went past her, white mists and slowly flowing, silver streams. 'It's all too peaceful to be really happy,' thought Jill. 'It's like a dream, a beautiful dream; and one loves it, yet wants to wake out of it, too.'

The last sweet notes dropped softly and there was a pause. Jill opened her eyes and met the eyes of Mademoiselle Ludérac turned, for a moment, upon her: 'Now listen,' they seemed to say.

It was as if one saw the colour of the sky changing; as if the mists parted and the figure of human suffering appeared. It was all memory, this lament of Orpheus; sweet, passionate memory; memories of lost beauty, of summer when winter is come; of love and parting. It spoke to Jill of her love and Dick's, and of how they, too, must one day part for ever. She had closed her eyes again in listening and when it was ended such a pang of grief came to her that it seemed to her for a moment that everything was really over and she and Dick long dead. She looked across the room at him. There he sat; they were still together, and she sought his eyes for reassurance. But he did not see her. He had folded his arms now and sat there, his head bent forward a little, gazing darkly at Marthe Ludérac.

'Yes, yes — for to-night that is sufficient!' said Madame de Lamouderie with palpable fretfulness.

The music had made her sad, too; and Dick was not thinking of her at all. 'It is too mournful, that "Ché faro." I do not like your Gluck; I like passion; brilliancy. "La Traviata"; "Théodora"; — but no; I confuse; that is the play; Sardou's play. — Did you ever see our great Sarah in the days of her triumphs?' With her fan laid on his arm she drew Graham's eyes to her and she went on, eagerly: 'No, you were too young. — But what a tigress — what a cooing dove!

Not beauty; she had no true beauty; it was, essentially, the versatile face of the Jewess; but what a vehicle for every passion; and, preëminently, for the passion of love. — Ah, and she could draw upon experience, Sarah! In my own *monde*, how many men have I not known to whom she granted her favours!'

Poor old lady. How terribly out of key she was! And did she not guess as much from the look that drifted down upon her from Dick's cold eyes as he leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head? But perhaps Dick, still, was not listening to her. He had cared for the music as much as she herself had; more, of course, for he was so much deeper than she was. And had he not begun to see, too, something of what she saw in Marthe Ludérac? What a triumph that would be! But the 'Ché faro' still made her feel miserable. She joined Mademoiselle Ludérac, who stood beside her harp.

'I can't tell you how I loved it,' she said.

Mademoiselle Ludérac smiled. 'I saw that you loved it. — Some day you must hear César Franck's "Psyché,"' she said.

'Is it anything like the Gluck?'

'There is a resemblance; yes; as if of colour.'

'What you said: something celestial?'

'Yes. Something celestial. Only in the "Psyché" there is so much more of that quality.'

'But it's dreadfully sad,' said Jill, after a moment, standing and watching Mademoiselle Ludérac adjust, here and there, a string of her instrument. 'The

celestial is dreadfully sad. As if everything was left behind.'

'Everything *is* left behind — in the celestial,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac.

Jill stood and thought. She had never in her life thought so deeply. 'Everything of earth, you mean. Not everything we care for, surely.'

'Perhaps everything we *think* we care for,' Mademoiselle Ludérac suggested, glancing up at her, and Jill felt the dreadful sadness flowing in upon her.

'But then — how can we feel it celestial?' she questioned, a tremor in her voice. 'We care for the celestial.'

Mademoiselle Ludérac's eyes were now upon her and they dwelt as Jill had not felt them dwell before. Something else came to her, as she met their gaze. Had she found it for herself? Or had Mademoiselle Ludérac shown it to her?

'That is the secret,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac. 'You have said it.'

'The secret?'

'It is what we care for most. That is all we know. But is it not enough to know? — We cannot think it. We cannot see it. It is ineffable. Yet we possess it.'

Jill gazed at her, groping in a mystery never before apprehended, yet feeling, in the darkness, a hand laid upon hers. 'I seem to understand things I don't really understand, when I am with you,' she smiled faintly. 'Is it living with great music that makes you seem to know so much more than other people?'

Mademoiselle Ludérac smiled faintly, too, at that.

'Or is it,' Jill went on, since she received no answer, 'that you have suffered more than most people?'

At this question a deep flush swept over Mademoiselle Ludérac's face, a flush deep, yet pale; intense, yet faint. To see it was like hearing the notes of the harp whispering together after they had been struck. Jill was almost frightened; but then all their strange, sudden talk, spoken in such low tones while they stood alone together, almost frightened her.

'I think it is like that,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac. Her flush had faded and she looked at Jill quietly. 'I think it is true that if I know more than others it is because I may have suffered more.' Her gaze was like the hand in the darkness, and after a moment she added, smiling with a singular sweetness, 'You have never suffered. Yet it was to you I played. You understand so much.'

'May I look at your harp?' Dick's voice broke in suddenly, very strangely, upon them, and they both started as they heard it and saw him standing there beside them. 'What a beautiful instrument it is. — May I look at it?'

'*Volontiers*,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac. She stood aside as if her harp were a prize dog or cat, at a show, that a stranger had asked to examine. But now they might talk to each other; Dick might now come to know her a little. Jill left them standing there and went over to the abandoned old lady.

'We must be going, I think,' she said, bending down

to Madame de Lamouderie and taking her by both hands. She was feeling very sorry for her; why she did not quite know — for after all she had had Dick all the evening. 'The lights at the Ecu d'Or will be out soon! — It's been too delicious. — You must ask us again to an evening concert.'

'Ah, one can have too much of music!' said the old lady crossly, and over Jill's bare, festive shoulder, her eye went to where Graham bent his head to examine Mademoiselle Ludérac's harp.

'But we will have a great deal besides music!' Jill rallied her. 'Tell me, can't I come some morning to take you for a motor-drive? The country here is so marvellous, and you can't really have seen it unless you've seen it from a car. — May I come to-morrow?'

'But my portrait?' said the old lady, mournfully now, still holding Jill by the hands and still looking over her shoulder at the other two. — Jill could hear that they were not speaking at all. — 'Is it to be abandoned?'

'But of course not! It's in the afternoons Dick comes for that; — and only when it rains!'

The old lady debated the point, with evident trouble. 'And Marthe? What will she be doing? Alone here.'

Jill felt like laughing. 'But surely she's accustomed to being alone.'

'Ah —' the old lady wagged her head in sage caution. 'Alone; but alone with me. — Alone with only

Joseph in the house would be a very different matter. — There are *mauvaises langues* in Buissac!'

'But what of her winters in Bordeaux? She lives all by herself in winter.'

The old lady kept some unspoken suspicion, that was evident as she said: 'Motors — they are not for my age. In my youth it was a coach-and-four I drove in, and in Paris my equipage was renowned for its brilliancy; — ah, what horses I had! Beautiful creatures, jet black and with red rosettes at their ears! That is the conveyance I care for! Motors confuse and distress me. Hardly does one recognize a scene before it is gone. One feels that one leaves oneself, dismembered, along the road! — One leaves oneself stuck to the landscape behind one! — like those distressing insects that cling to our lamps on summer nights! — you know them? Insects with long red bodies. One tries to withdraw them from their predicament — and the body comes off in one's fingers while the face and front feet remain attached to the lamp! So motoring affects me!'

The wonderful old creature had managed to amuse herself, and as she saw Jill's laughter she laughed, too, if ruefully. 'Aren't they dreadful! I know! I know!' said Jill. 'And such mournful faces, poor things. Why should they be so silly!'

'Ah, we are not unlike them,' said the old lady, darkly now, as another analogy offered itself. 'We are not unlike those insects. We, too, burn ourselves at the lamp of love! It is the destiny of women!

Marthe!' she cried suddenly. 'Marthe! Here is Madame Graham who wishes to say good-night to us. We are keeping her! We must not forget our manners!'

Mademoiselle Ludérac came to them at once, but with no appearance of haste or contrition, and Jill, feeling angry and amused, turned to Graham. 'I'm trying to get someone to consent to have a motor-drive with me. Madame de Lamouderie doesn't like motors. Will you come?' she asked Mademoiselle Ludérac. 'Will you come for a drive to-morrow?'

Mademoiselle Ludérac stood silent and perplexed.

'But how can you go, Marthe? What can we do here, without you?' said Madame de Lamouderie, though, now that her *protégée* was before her, her tone towards her had altered. It was almost pleadingly that she spoke. 'You have the *ménage* in the mornings and your harp; — and it is in the mornings that you read to me. You will not abandon your old incubus for new friends?' said the old lady with a twisted, wheedling smile.

'But she can go with me in the afternoon,' interposed Jill. 'Dick is with you then, so you won't miss her.'

The old lady's expression changed at that.

'At what time is the reading?' Graham inquired, and they were none of them giving Mademoiselle Ludérac a chance to reply to Jill's invitation.

'At eleven — and again at seven!' cried the old lady, reviving in his presence. 'In the mornings she reads what I choose, and in the evenings, when I tend to go

to sleep, I submit to her choice; — grave, edifying books! Poetry, and history; — I do not care for them! I go to sleep easily in the evening, do I not, Marthe?' she said, taking Mademoiselle Ludérac by the arm and looking up at her cajolingly. 'But at eleven she is brave, resigned. I like my books spiced and salted! I am not afraid of our *gros rire gaulois!*'

It was all intended, Jill saw, as a pretty display for Graham.

A crushing blow was to fall upon her. Was it in malice, Jill wondered. Did Dick enjoy tormenting his poor old admirer? 'Nothing could be more opportune for my work, then,' he announced. 'I shall come tomorrow morning while Mademoiselle Ludérac reads spicy, salted books to you. You won't have to reproach me, so, with making your portrait dreary.'

The poor old lady, still holding Mademoiselle Ludérac by the arm, gazed at him with bodeful eyes. 'Dreary? Am I then so dreary?'

'Anything but — when you are allowed to be yourself. But when I forbid you to speak, and stare at you for half an hour on end without a word, I lose you; — I completely lose you,' said Graham, with an air of kindness, smiling down upon her.

'But it will disturb you, to have someone there reading. You do not like to be overlooked.'

'I shall ask Mademoiselle Ludérac to turn her back on us; like your curé. I shall not hear her reading. I shall be too much absorbed in you.'

'But — when you are not painting,' the poor old lady faltered — and Jill, amused at her predicament, yet surprised by Dick's whim, felt that it was as if he held her impaled on a pin — an unfortunate old insect indeed — and watched her vainly gyrate — 'shall we not talk together?'

'That will be for you to decide,' said Graham. 'If you find the book very salted, you may not care to have the reading stop, even when I am not painting. I, of course, should find your conversation more interesting, and perhaps more salted, than any book.'

Mademoiselle Ludérac stood between them, tall, silent, very Byzantine in aspect. She looked at neither of them. She seemed to dissociate herself from the situation. And indeed the old lady's predicament was one from which she could not openly rescue her.

'So to-morrow, at eleven,' said Graham, smiling and raising Madame de Lamouderie's hand to his lips. 'Rain or shine. I feel a new confidence.'

'And may I come for you, for a drive, to-morrow afternoon?' Jill said, meeting Mademoiselle Ludérac's eyes at last.

'A thousand thanks, *chère Madame;* — but I have my practising in the afternoon, again, and to-morrow Joseph and I will be very busy in the garden,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac.

'May I come and garden with you, then? I love gardening,' said Jill, and her gaze gaily challenged, gently mocked her friend's retreat. For it was ridic-

ulous of Marthe Ludérac to pretend that she was not her friend.

'*Vous êtes trop bonne, Madame,*' said Mademoiselle Ludérac. She evaded challenge and mockery.

CHAPTER XIV

Eurydice

SO, next morning, Graham walked up to the Manoir. It was still raining heavily and the weather gave to his change of programme a further relevancy. Impossible, in any case, to work out of doors to-day.

As he went, his coat turned up about his ears, his hands in his pockets, his eyes downcast, it was over the relevant aspects of his present undertaking that his mind was moving; lightly, as it were, and with careful footsteps. It was all absolutely relevant. It had been as easy to show frankness to Jill as to show duplicity to the old lady. He had said to Jill last night that he wanted to see something more of Mademoiselle Ludérac and Jill had completely understood, completely approved. Jill, it might even be said, urged him on. She wanted him, most insistently wanted him, to know and appreciate Mademoiselle Ludérac. So that was all right, thought Graham, turning off the highroad at the cemetery wall and beginning the steep ascent among the chestnut forests.

The grave, dark forest, its vistas swept by slanting rain, pitched his thoughts in a different key and set them to a different tempo. They went more heavily; they found their way, and their way was not always clear to find. But was not that all that his present enterprise really came to? He wanted to see Mademoi-

selle Ludérac. For he could never see her, never in the sense of possessing his vision; this was the lack, the failure that urged him on. There, among the rainswept vistas, he stopped and pondered. No; he could not see her face. To his potent, creative memory, the experience was a new one. Mademoiselle Ludérac was an aspect of nature and never before had nature evaded him. She was an aspect of nature and he had needed only, until now, to look upon such a one in order to possess its secret; for in the aspect was the secret and its discovery, its expression, was the artist's task and ecstasy. They were there, waiting in memory for his summons, because he had chosen to look at them, those significant aspects; — yet Mademoiselle Ludérac, whom he had chosen to look at for an hour, he could not summon. When he tried to see her, all that came clearly were her hands. It was as if her hands, helplessly, had allowed themselves to be mastered by his vision. He could see them placing the daffodils as if before a shrine; he could see them laid in mastery upon the harp; taking curious heraldic attitudes when thumb and little finger plucked at difficult chords; dissolved, while the arpeggios flowed from under them, into multiplied delicacies, or lay flat upon the strings, with a sudden mysterious urgency, to hush their golden whispering.

Why could he not see her face? He knew what it was like; accurately. He could have catalogued it; but he could not see it. Was it because of her eyes that he could not see her? When he looked at her, they met his

look and gave him nothing; nothing; — not even retreat; not even denial. The nature he summoned was passive; it yielded itself up to his quest. Mademoiselle Ludérac's eyes, though they neither retreated nor denied, met his force with an equal potency.

All about her, last night, golden forms had been ranged, falling into a halo around her remote, melodious figure; daffodils, the colour of light, candle-flames, the colour of daffodils, and the golden strings of her majestic instrument. The picture she made was there, waiting for him, and he would have possessed it had he but the key; — her eyes, her face. No; — he walked on and on; — he could not evoke it. He could only feel, not see it. Her gaze flowed from her eyes like the music from under her fingers, giving him a sense of breathlessness, of pain. It was as if he sought to take a daffodil into his hand and found that it was a flame.

But not only the opposing forces of her soul had thus baffled and blinded his memory. The music had been there and he could not listen while he saw, or see while he listened. With a sense of relief yet of haste, or pursuit, his thought plunged down another labyrinth. It had been the music, then, rather than her eyes. It was slight, it was thin, that music for Eurydice, but as he had listened it had brought back an old anguish. What was the sense of a lack in things that had haunted him since boyhood? This thirst for the reality under the appearance? Again and again he had evoked from enigmatic earth her essential harmonies, only to find when, in weariness and joy, he sought to

grasp an abiding answer, that he had evoked a deeper enigma. For the beauty, born of nature and spirit, itself was dumb. Beauty arose before him; but her finger was on her lips. He was no Orpheus; he lamented no lost Eurydice. He felt, he sought; but he had never seen her.

But where was his thought now leading him? Graham felt himself turn back. And, as so often in his life, it was to Jill he turned. Dear Jill. Bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh; innocent earth; earth without its enigma. He never sought, since he had never needed, Jill. She was there too completely; his child, his playmate, his companion. With Jill he was at one with nature; with all that had been happy in his childhood. That was his good fortune; — but it had nothing to do with the self beneath appearance. It was an Eurydice that self needed; the habitant of another, and a deeper world; she who knew the secrets of the grave and the secrets — must it not be so? — of Elysium; of the eternal beauty that drew life on towards a perpetual contemplation.

'But what am I thinking of now?' said Graham to himself as he saw suddenly that the sycamores of the Manoir were below him. 'In Heaven's name let me rid myself of this folly. It's as if I were bewitched,' he thought. 'And I'm not going, at this time of my life, to confuse the *ewig-weibliche* with the Platonic forms!' Such, indeed, had never been his tendency. The loves of his youth had been ironically transient. And now, in passing through the Manoir gate, he could shake off

the obsessing mood of the forest and tell himself that he had come, in the most literal, most dryly professional sense, to see Mademoiselle Ludérac. Let him but once possess her face, so that he could draw it from memory, and the mood would be exorcised. And there drifted dimly through his mind the outline of an ethereal, leaning head; a shape only, featureless; yet it gazed, as if on paradise, and he saw the backward lines of its windswept hair.

Though he had come so slowly — and hours, to his apprehension, seemed to have passed since he had said good-bye to Jill — the Manoir clock was just striking eleven when Joseph let him in. He made some affable remark about the bad weather as Joseph helped him off with his coat, but, answering never a word, Joseph only bowed his head in sad assent.

Madame de Lamouderie was the first object that met his eye on entering the drawing-room. She sat in readiness, in her *bergère*, her lips rouged, her cheeks powdered, her mantilla on her head; and his easel was in place and the portrait was upon it. But though she was ready, she showed no sparkle. She was grave, and almost distant.

'This is terrible weather, is it not?' she said, giving him her hand. 'It is brave of you indeed to venture out. — Madame Graham is well?'

'Yes, Jill's always well.'

'You are wise to cherish her.'

'I don't cherish her!' laughed Graham. 'You might as well talk of cherishing an oak-tree!'

'To me the simile she suggests is rather that of a rose.'

'Oh, I only spoke hygienically,' said Graham, all good-humour. 'If it comes to æsthetic analogies I can match you, I feel sure.'

'I thought that, æsthetically, Madame Graham did not interest you. I had even feared that you might look upon her only as a peach.'

Graham, at that, shot a glance at his old friend, and it conveyed a warning.

She changed the subject. 'We are all in readiness for you, you see. Marthe will be here directly. She is engaged, I think, in dusting my room. But she does not forget our hour. Ah, here she is,' and Graham, turning, saw that Mademoiselle Ludérac had entered.

She was in black, as always. It was for that, perhaps, that she had always the peasant look. All that he saw of her was that she was in black and that she bowed her head in answer to his murmured greeting.

'Have you any choice of a book?' asked Madame de Lamouderie, as he turned again to his easel, and he was aware that she observed maliciously something awkward in his demeanour. 'Marthe is ready to read us anything that we may choose. — Are you not, Marthe?'

Mademoiselle Ludérac made no reply to this question, conceiving, probably, that it required none.

'But I've nothing to do with the reading,' said Graham. 'It must be your choice. Or perhaps I may rely on Mademoiselle Ludérac to choose something

that will absorb and delight you.' Graham looked towards the young woman.

'Ah, Marthe is my good angel, but she is not a magician,' said the old lady, who, evidently, was bent on making him feel her mood a bitter one. 'There is no book written that could absorb or delight me. A passing diversion; that is alone possible. — What have you, Marthe?'

Mademoiselle Ludérac was standing before a row of books set side by side on the table in the alcove. 'Shall we go on with "La Colline Inspirée"?' she inquired.

'*Ah, non;* I am weary of that Barrès! He is too intellectual. — Distinguished, but lifeless. I like people, not localities; it is always localities, or theories, he gives us.'

Graham saw that Mademoiselle Ludérac slightly smiled. The old lady's humour did not flourish in an unappreciative atmosphere.

'The new François Mauriac?'

'Ah, *non, par exemple!*' Madame de Lamouderie rejected the suggestion with even more emphasis. 'He is indeed of a dreariness, that young man! — He is like hot dust in the mouth. One imagines that one has found a tale of passion, of flesh and blood, and lo, before one knows where one is, all is tombs and dust and penitence! I do not relish these young Catholics. — I am indeed a *diable dans leur bénitier!*' the old lady laughed grimly; adding, 'Have you a volume of Maupassant?'

'Not much penitence, perhaps, but no lack of dust in

him,' Graham remarked, sitting down before his work and aware that though his eyes were on it he did not see it. His thought was not behind his eyes. It was fixed on Mademoiselle Ludérac, standing at the other end of the room before the table; and at the blurred edge of his field of vision a tall blackness was her form and a narrow slip of white her hand, hanging against her skirt — 'Always her hands!' thought Graham.

'But Maupassant is not dreary,' the old lady was saying, and it was reassuring to know that she could not guess that he was really looking at Mademoiselle Ludérac. 'Horrible, often; and amusing, to the extreme, but never dreary; and never, never edifying. What I most dislike is the attempt, surreptitiously, as it were, to edify. — Still, if you dislike him?'

'Oh, I don't dislike him. Only, are we not over with him a long time since?'

'You said the other day that you would like to hear "Dominique" again,' Mademoiselle Ludérac spoke and turned her head to glance at Madame de Lamouderie.

'Monsieur Graham will say that we are over with him even a longer time since!' Madame de Lamouderie replied.

'I've never read "Dominique,"' said Graham. 'But it provides you, surely, with no salt or spice.'

'You must not take me *au pied de la lettre*, Monsieur,' rejoined the old lady with her stately bitterness. 'My spices and salts would seem very insipid to your young palate!' — and once again she laughed, very grimly.

Graham, in spite of his devouring preoccupation, was amused by her ill-humour and, as his eyes now met hers, they showed so infectious a spark of mirth that, helplessly, Madame de Lamouderie smiled back at him.

'Do let us have "Dominique,"' he said.

'Let us have "Dominique," Marthe,' the old lady echoed.

Mademoiselle Ludérac, her book in her hand, passed behind Graham to seat herself at the window and as she went a low thud-thud from the hearth drew his attention to the old dog lying there, the black-and-white dog that he and Jill had seen on their first visit to the Manoir. He was of a nondescript breed, half spaniel, half retriever, with a broad silky head, laid flatly on his paws, and large dim eyes which followed Mademoiselle Ludérac to her place and dwelt upon her with devout, contented passion. He evidently could still see his adored mistress and she must have made some answering gesture of love, for the contentment deepened and again the tail thudded heavily.

'What a charming dog!' said Graham, mixing his *grisaille* on his palette.

'He is Marthe's dog,' said the old lady. 'She has had him for many years. She is, as you may observe, the centre of his life; but to me he is very kind when we are alone together in the winter, *n'est-ce-pas*, Médor?' and the old lady smiled at the dog, who, without moving his head, turned his eyes on her and once more, gently, thudded his tail, though with a lessened emphasis.

'Médor? He couldn't be anything but Médor, could he? — Is he one of Mademoiselle Ludérac's rescued animals?' Graham inquired. It was odd to speak of her as if she were not present. But it would, he felt, be even more odd to speak to her.

'Yes. She rescued him. He was tied up, day and night, at a farm. She used to go and see him; and sit with him. It touched the people's hearts, perhaps. At all events, Médor was sold to Marthe.'

Médor, hearing that he attracted so much attention, could remain passive no longer and, with a low, blissful grumbling, he rose and went slowly and stiffly across to where his mistress sat.

'*Là, mon cher; là, mon bon chien,*' Graham heard her whispering, while she fondled Médor's head. '*Couche-toi; — sois tranquil.* You will not be as comfortable as by the fire.'

At this Graham got up, took the hearth-rug and laid it beside Mademoiselle Ludérac. — 'So that Médor can be happy body and soul,' he commented and, not looking at him, her eyes on Médor, she murmured, '*Vous êtes trop aimable.*'

'Well, now that Médor is settled, shall we read?' said Madame de Lamouderie who had observed this little scene with not unsympathetic eyes.

Graham sat down again at his easel and behind him Mademoiselle Ludérac raised her book and began to read. Her voice was calm and clear. The slow, silver rhythms of 'Dominique' circled through his consciousness and made him think of Gluck's Elysian fields. It

was emotion not even recollected in tranquillity; or did not the slow pulse of memory beat softly beneath the current, presaging resuscitation? Half hypnotized, he listened, and met the ambiguous stare of the mournful old owl perched there before him. He held himself steady before Madame de Lamouderie. His mind was watchful and the alertness served his work. Steadily, accurately, his hand obeyed the bidding of his will.

'And now you may rest and we may talk,' he said at the end of a half-hour. Mademoiselle Ludérac rose and said that she would take ten minutes for her lamps. Médor followed her out of the room, and Graham and his old friend were left alone together.

Madame de Lamouderie showed no change of expression. She turned her eyes on the weather and remarked that they would soon be threatened by floods if the rain continued.

'I should like to see a flood, with corpses,' Graham smiled at her, leaning back and stretching his arms.

'Ah,' the old lady continued to gaze out of the window. 'You see life, I am aware, as a banquet for yourself. Other people's tragedies are your stimulants.'

'No, no; not at all,' Graham gently laughed. 'I am like you. I enjoy drama, I enjoy being in drama; not only observing it.'

This made her look at him. 'Yes, you enjoy drama,' she repeated, eyeing him. 'Whether that is like me I

do not know. You enjoy danger. You enjoy playing with fire.'

'True.' Graham, his hands now locked behind his head, nodded at her. 'Fire is a delicious element.'

'I have seen a great deal of life,' the old lady went on, after they had contemplated each other for a moment. 'I have known a great many men, and I may tell you that those who play with fire always burn their fingers.'

'As mine are now being burned by you, you mean?' Graham cheerfully inquired. 'I gladly pay the price. The game is worth the candle.'

'I do not burn you,' the old lady continued, ignoring his levity. 'I do not even freeze you. I am your friend. I merely offer you a little cold water.'

'But why? I'm not fire!' laughed Graham. 'You mustn't judge me by all those ardent princes and diplomats of your youth! I'm an essentially stolid Britisher.' But he was not at ease. There was in the old lady's unexpected impersonality a note of genuineness that disturbed him.

'Stolid! Oh, no; you are not stolid!' Madame de Lamouderie returned with open mockery. 'Nor are you a mystic visionary. It is not the apparition of a Saint Cecilia you wait for, a Saint Cecilia among the pots and pans and dusters! — You are fire; and if you choose to run underground, do not imagine that I do not detect you!'

Graham kept his countenance with difficulty, for he was indeed confounded. 'You know,' he warned her,

trying to maintain a rallying tone, 'if you won't be the kind of Goya I want you to be, you'll have to be another kind. Interesting, too; very; but not nearly so pleasing from your point of view, I'm sure. You are delightful in this mood, perfectly delightful; to me. But you won't be delighted with your portrait when you see what I shall have to make of you.'

'Make of me what you will, Monsieur. I am at your service. The sinner, by all means, after the saint. — I do not care for saints. *Des gens forts louches;* that is what I suspect them of being. — Shall we go on with our work? — Marthe!' called the old lady.

'But it's a jocund sinner I want; not a tragic one,' said Graham, and he smiled at her. 'Come, come; — we are friends, as you say. You are not going to be a menacing sky to me; — not a Cassandra; but my merry Sphinx of the hillside.'

A dim smile passed across her features at that. 'Ah, the poor old Sphinx! She was never merry.'

'She was. She is. And sphinxes are more to my taste than saints. You know that.'

'Do I know it? What do you really mean, you ambiguous young man?'

'Just as much as you do.'

'It is the Sphinx who should speak in riddles; not you.'

'The Sphinx should not ask questions, then. Come; shall we really get to work?'

'By all means. — Marthe! — She does not come.' But as she spoke Mademoiselle Ludérac entered.

'What do you think of my sketch, Mademoiselle?' Graham asked, without hesitation, as she passed behind his chair. To speak to her in this easy tone was to demonstrate to the old lady that he was not running underground.

She paused there, behind him. Solitudes; solitudes where violets grew; the breath of lonely spring-tide woods seemed wafted to him from her presence.

'Do I look a cheerful or a tragic sinner, Marthe?' the old lady inquired.

Mademoiselle Ludérac considered. 'The portrait is very interesting, but it does not flatter you,' she said.

'And why should it flatter me? Monsieur Graham is no flatterer. Do you like it? That is the point.'

'I do not like the smile. — But the eyes I like, very much.'

'Are they eyes that, in youth, could have stirred men's hearts? Can you tell me that?'

Graham saw that Mademoiselle Ludérac smiled at her old friend over his head. '*Mais oui, mais oui*,' she answered, 'and much more besides.'

'I ask for no more,' said the old lady.

'And what is wrong with the smile?' asked Graham.

The moment of arrest that always followed any direct approach he ventured upon made itself felt; but Mademoiselle Ludérac found a full reply — 'If it could be the smile she gave to Médor?'

'Ah, but she isn't looking at Médor, you must remember; she is looking at me,' said Graham. 'I

should ask nothing better than that she should look at me as she looks at Médor!'

'Médor has no secrets!' the old lady rejoined and the sparkle of challenge shot from her eyes as they met his smile. 'Imitate Médor, and you shall be looked at as he is looked at!' She challenged him; but she was mollified, if ever so little.

Graham then painted, Mademoiselle Ludérac read, and, outside, the desperate day dashed itself against the window-panes. On his rug Médor, with a drowsy sigh, stretched himself to deeper slumbers, and presently Graham saw that the great eyes before him were closing. Tick-tock, he heard the old clock in the hall. The silver rhythms of Dominique flowed on; but Madame de Lamouderie had fallen asleep.

Graham continued to paint for a little while. He touched soft pallor on the folded hands and drew a line of rose along the tips. Then his hand was still. The reading paused; continued, paused again, and then ceased. Silence flowed around them. All the world was sleeping. 'Now I can turn and look at her,' thought Graham.

But another thought inhibited an impulse that had almost accomplished itself. How intolerable — for him, and for Mademoiselle Ludérac — how destructive of his position at the Manoir, if the old lady's eyes should open and find him so engaged. No; he could not risk it. His frame was taut with the strain of his repression, and a curious contraction tightened the muscles of the arm that held his palette; but he

did not dare to turn. Behind him Mademoiselle Ludérac neither spoke nor moved. Médor slept, and Madame de Lamouderie slept; the clock ticked, loudly; softly; and it seemed suddenly to Graham that the silence was filled by a complicity of control. Did not she also wish him to look at her?

Madame de Lamouderie opened her eyes. She gazed at Graham for a moment, in astonishment; then, swiftly, over at Mademoiselle Ludérac. Her expression took on a sudden calm. 'Have I slept?' she inquired.

'For at least five minutes,' said Graham.

'It seems an hour to me. I am refreshed. And you, what have you done?'

'I've stared at you, and at my picture. Mademoiselle Ludérac, I suppose,' and, deliberately, Graham turned in his chair and looked at her, 'has stared at the rain.'

'Yes,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac, and now, as her dark eyes rested upon him, he attempted to turn his desire at its very source, to refrain from the quest and concentrate his faculty in a cold, devouring intentness, so that her features should at last be stamped ineffaceably upon his brain. For one sliding instant he saw her; saw the long oval of her face; the clear, wide spaces in which her eyes were set, the rosy mauve that shaped her lips; but it was only for an instant. The vision slipped from him; the sharp flame burnt him; he saw her face no longer, but only felt a presence, pale, piteous, darkly preoccupied, yet still resisting; a presence that in this new guise had come nearer than

ever before; so near that when her eyes removed themselves from his — and with a self-command at which he marvelled — it was as if from an actual contact.

'*Bien*. I shall not again transgress.'

He had almost forgotten Madame de Lamouderie, and from the blandness of her tone he could measure the degree of Mademoiselle Ludérac's self-command. She had sustained the old lady's scrutiny through a moment that would not have left his pulses pounding as they were had it not brought to her, also, some revelation. He had felt that piteousness in her because of all that was required of her in self-command. She feared him; she greatly feared him. To Madame de Lamouderie she had showed only calm; but to him she had betrayed her fear.

'I had pleasant dreams; very pleasant,' the old lady went on, as he took up his palette. 'I was walking in the garden of my childhood and Médor was by my side. I wore a broad straw hat tied with blue ribbons and Médor carried in his mouth a basket of strawberries. Continue, therefore, your tragic portrait. I am all at your service.'

CHAPTER XV

Marthe Ludérac's Story

JILL had spent the morning at the Ecu d'Or, writing letters. They had taken a small salon, *au premier*, sparsely furnished with a carved centre-table, two red velvet chairs, a velvet sofa, and three bronzes on the mantelpiece; two of them vases encrusted with flowers and between these a galloping horse, a clock set in its chest, and on its back a rider clothed only in a turbulent scarf.

The day was so cold and so dreary that Jill had had a fire lighted and it was before the fire that Graham found her, stretched on the sofa, a cigarette between her lips; and, turning her head to look round at him, she said, 'Well?'

Graham came and stood at the head of the sofa. She could not see him as he stood there above her.

'What kind of time did you have?' she asked.

'The old lady was very cross with me,' said Graham after a moment.

'Of course she was,' said Jill.

'But I enjoyed her,' said Graham. 'She's such a clever old scoundrel.'

'Of course she is. — Not such a scoundrel, either. She's merely very human. And I'm sorry for her,' said Jill. 'It must be so bewildering to see you transfer

your attention to someone else; just when she was having the time of her life with you. — Did Marthe Ludérac read?'

'Naturally. The old lady wouldn't have been cross if she hadn't read.'

'But I somehow thought she'd have prevented it; circumvented you by some trick or plan.'

'She'd have liked to, of course; only she was afraid of losing me altogether if she did,' Graham analysed the old lady's dilemma.

'Oh, it *is* too bad, you know. You're bound to her more than ever now; — I hope you realize that; — and to let her see she's not to lose you.'

'Ah, well, that will still depend on her; on her behaviour,' laughed Graham, enjoying, apparently, the gross complacency of his own attitude. But Jill felt something else under the complacency. He still stood above her.

'Did you get a talk with Marthe?' she now inquired.

'A talk? How should I?'

'Well, I suppose you couldn't, since the old lady was there. And after all,' said Jill, 'you didn't expect to talk to her, did you? All you expected was to look at her.'

'Well, I didn't look at her, either. She sat behind me. — How long to lunch?' he asked.

The bronze horseman stood, disconcertingly, above five o'clock.

'Only fifteen minutes, I think. — What an awful day!' Jill glanced at the windows.

'I shall have another walk this afternoon, all the same. I'm feeling a little liverish.'

'I don't think I'll go out. I'm feeling as if I'd caught a cold.'

'I don't wonder.' Graham now walked over to the window and looked out.

Jill, in the silence that followed, was asking herself whether she was really frightened. Dick and she were together. Together. Nothing was hidden between them. Why this strange breathlessness? Was it Dick who was frightened? — She steadied her nerves. It was like drawing at a rein.

Suddenly Graham came back, and sat down beside her and put his head on her shoulder. Jill's heart stood still.

'What would you feel about clearing out of all this, Jill?' he said.

'All this?'

'Yes. Buissac.'

'Are you tired of Buissac?'

'Yes, I think I am. Tired of the old woman. And tired of the young one. — They get on my nerves.'

It was Dick's superstition then. Only that. They must not yield to superstition; though a real fear it might be well to yield to. 'But the portrait?' said Jill.

'I'll chuck it.'

'It seems so cruel to chuck her.'

'I don't mind being cruel.'

'And all those pictures you've started. Don't you mind leaving them?'

'Yes, I mind, in a way. But what do you feel about it all?' Dick muttered.

It was difficult to know what she felt, with Dick's dear head pressed against her neck, his arm holding her across her breast. But Dick was not caressing her. He was taking refuge with her. And she, too, was afraid of Buissac now. She hated being afraid. She hated to yield to fear.

'What I feel is what you feel,' she said slowly, trying to think. 'I mean — it's all for you, of course, the places we stay at. If you want to go, so do I. What is there to keep us, if you really want to go?'

But as she spoke she knew that there was something that did keep her. Was it only her superstition, as against Dick's? Her white magic against his black mood? Marthe Ludérac kept her. She and Marthe Ludérac had something to do for each other. Was that only superstition? But it seemed like running away, it seemed like cowardice, to turn one's back not only on Marthe Ludérac's celestial secret, but on her tragedy.

Dick kept his face pressed into her shoulder. He was waiting for an answer.

'Have your walk first,' she found. 'Lunch will make a difference, too, perhaps. Don't forget that it's nothing new, Dick. You wanted to run away the other day, before —' She had been going to say, 'before you had seen Marthe Ludérac,' but she changed it to — 'before you'd begun the portrait. If you run away now, I mean, it might become a habit!' and Jill tried

to make her voice very light as she found this admonition. 'And it would be such an inconvenient habit. Think it over, by yourself, first, Dick. And then, if you really want to go, we will go.'

Graham felt that she was saying: 'Steady, old boy; steady.'

When after lunch, he had gone out into the rain — and they did not speak again of the decision she thus left to him — Jill lay down on the sofa. She had a headache. She did not want to read. A wood fire on a wet spring day was a pleasant thing to look at and she lay and looked at it.

Suddenly the door opened and Amélie's head, in uncouth fashion, appeared round it while her moist red hand held it ajar.

'*Mademoiselle Ludérac demande à voir Madame.*'

Jill sat up. An electric shock seemed to pass through her; a mingling of reluctance and delight.

Amélie thoughtfully surveyed her. 'I shall tell her that Madame is occupied?'

'No, no — of course not. — Tell her to come up,' said Jill. She rose to her feet. This was the solution, then. She could not decide. Dick could not decide. Marthe Ludérac would decide for them whether they were to stay on in Buissac. — 'But what nonsense,' said Jill to herself. 'I shall soon become as dotty as poor Dick.'

She stood looking towards the door which Amélie had left ajar, and in a moment it was pushed softly open and Marthe Ludérac stood before her. She wore

the black raincoat in which Jill had first seen her and a small black hat which made her face look strangely young. Her expression, too, was young. Everybody was frightened to-day. Marthe Ludérac was frightened.

'Oh, how wet you are!' Jill started forward after the involuntary pause in which they had contemplated each other. 'You are dripping wet! — Let me take this.'

Mademoiselle Ludérac, in an unresisting silence, submitted to her help. 'Sit down here, beside me,' said Jill; but, looking unseeingly around her, she took a chair at the table and Jill sank down again on the sofa opposite her.

'I wished to see you alone. I must speak with you,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac in a fixed, firm manner. 'I saw that your husband was gone. — Is it for long? Shall we be uninterrupted?'

'Yes, he's gone. He'll be gone for a long time. What is it? Has anything happened to trouble you?' asked Jill, and her voice trembled a little.

'No, nothing has happened. Nothing new has happened to trouble me. — It is you who trouble me,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac, putting her hands, clasped together, on the table before her and fixing her eyes upon them. 'There is something you should know. I did not think I should have to speak of it. Not to another soul have I ever spoken of my life. But last night it came to me that you must know; for I cannot defend myself against you.' She checked herself. Her

voice, too, was trembling. For a moment she sat silent, while Jill, motionless, gazed at her. Then she said, and her voice was firm again: 'It is this. My mother was a murderess.'

Jill, transfixed, gazed upon her.

'She killed my father,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac, not raising her eyes from her knotted hands. 'It was what is called a *crime passionnel*. He loved another woman and she killed him and tried to kill herself.'

Jill sat and gazed upon the black, resolute figure; the pale, fixed face. As the meaning of the knife-like words came fully to her understanding, she saw that Mademoiselle Ludérac had come to cut herself away; to set herself apart again. It was severance she had come to ensure. And it was true that the sense of awe that descended upon Jill had in it an abyss-like element; as though the gulf of suffering revealed in the words did indeed divide them.

'Madame de Lamouderie told me that your mother was mad,' she said. This was all that she could find to say at first.

'I asked her what she had told you. It was kind of her to say no more; very kind,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac.

'She was so dreadfully sorry, of course. But I wish she could have told me everything. It would have spared you this,' said Jill. 'When you asked her, she could have told you that I knew. Then you need never have spoken about it, unless you felt you wanted to.'

At this Mademoiselle Ludérac sat silent, looking

fixedly at her hands. She sat for some moments; then she rose. 'That is all. I will go now. You have been good to me. You will believe in my gratitude.'

Jill also rose and confronted her. 'But what do you think you have done? Do you think that I shall care for you the less because your mother killed your father?'

Across the table, arrested, with the glance, almost, of a trapped creature, Mademoiselle Ludérac met her eyes. It was what she had thought; or feared; or hoped; — for she seemed trapped rather than released. And, turning her eyes away, she murmured, darkly: 'You must not try to be my friend; I cannot have a friend. It is not a happy thing for you that you should have come to Buissac.'

'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came.' It floated through Jill's mind; and with it Dick's face as she had seen it a little while before. It had not been a happy thing for Dick. Dick's intuition had been right. There was a dark tower; and Mademoiselle Ludérac had been shut into it since childhood. All the more reason to break down the doors, and let her out.

'But you see I am your friend,' she said, and tears came to her eyes. 'You can't get rid of me. You don't know what a friend is. You've lived so long shut up by yourself in the dark that you are afraid of the daylight. Friends do not love you the less because you've been unhappy. They love you the more. You may not care about me,' said Jill, while her voice trembled, 'but I shall care for you always.'

It may have been because she saw her tears and they weakened her too much, or it may have been with an overwhelming sense of woe, but Mademoiselle Ludérac sank down on her chair beside the table and leaned her face upon her hands. She said nothing. She made no sound. Jill did not think that she was crying. Perhaps she was thinking; thinking intently behind this last rampart. Jill, after a moment, came and sat down beside her.

'Let me tell you. It's so strange. I feel as if we were meant to meet, long ago. I've thought and thought about you and your mother. You've both been real to me since I saw her grave last autumn, with your roses on it. When Madame de Lamouderie told me about you, how she had first met you both in the woods, and how you led her — and loved her — it seemed to break my heart. I saw her portrait last night and it brought you both still nearer. It's just as if I'd known that little girl. You can't keep me away. You must let me share it with you. Nobody, since she's gone, has ever cared for you as I do.'

Marthe Ludérac was weeping now. No sob shook her. They were not passionate tears; but Jill saw them falling, falling, slowly, between her hands; and leaning closely to her she put her arms around her and drew her head upon her shoulder and murmured: 'Oh — my dear, dear Marthe!'

Marthe Ludérac lay on her shoulder and wept. 'Thank Heaven for this,' Jill was thinking. 'Thank Heaven we did not leave Buissac before this happened.

She can never be so lonely again, now. Even if I have to leave her, she will know that I am there, and that I know, and love her.' And a beautiful sense of happiness, deeper, more beautiful, perhaps, than any she had ever felt, filled Jill's heart.

'No, there is no one like you,' she heard Marthe Ludérac say at last.

'Tell me about it. Don't you want to? Wouldn't it help? It's so dreadful to keep things to oneself always.'

A long time seemed to have passed, and as Jill questioned her thus, so gently, Marthe Ludérac took her hand and pressed it for a moment against her wet cheek, repeating, 'There is no one like you.'

'Will you tell me?' said Jill. 'Was she really mad? Or was that only what people thought.'

'No, she was not mad.' Helplessly, before Jill's tenderness, Marthe Ludérac suffered herself to be led forth, and her look, almost of astonishment, was indeed the look of one who can hardly believe in daylight. Wan with her tears, weak, gentle, she leaned on her hand and kept her eyes on Jill. 'Sometimes, the injury to her head gave her such pain that she became unconscious — or fell into a frenzy; but she was not really mad. That people thought her so was well for us; it gave us shelter.'

'But it kept people from you, dear Marthe.'

'But that was well. It was a veil, a cloak. — What could we have done with people?' said Marthe Ludérac in her weak, gentle voice.

'It must have been so lonely, so horribly lonely,'

Jill murmured. 'Had you no one? — no one at all? Were there no relations to care what became of her and you?'

'No one at all. My grandmother, the one who lived here, died of grief, before my mother's trial came on. My father had lost his parents; two old aunts of his would have taken me, but they were my mother's enemies.'

'And you were so poor,' Jill mused on her. 'How did you manage all those years? You could not work then.'

'My mother had her little fortune; it almost all went to pay the expenses of her defence; but there was a little left.'

Jill wondered how she should question further; but Marthe Ludérac, after the pause which followed her last words, continued to speak. 'It was *un crime passionnel*,' she said. 'There were extenuating circumstances. That was why she was set at liberty. And to see her, half dying, appear before them, with her bandaged head; that, too, softened their hearts.'

'You were there? At her trial?'

'I was a witness.'

'But you were so young —'

'I had seen it all,' said Marthe Ludérac. 'Yes; I was young, but I think that from the beginning I had understood it all. Joseph and I, and the young woman's husband, were the chief witnesses.'

She needed no questioning. Jill saw that she would tell her everything. For the first time in her life she

was speaking, without fear, openly, to another soul. She did not look at Jill. Her eyes, fixed on the window, reflected the grey, melancholy day; her words fell like the rain, softly and steadily; the sorrow of her voice was hushed to contemplation. 'My mother was always unhappy,' she said. 'That was the first thing I understood. The very nursery songs she sang to me came to me with the sense of melancholy. She was always afraid. She loved him so much; — and he was only kind to her. There was not a time that I can see, in looking back, when I did not know that her heart was breaking.'

'Oh, wasn't it all your dreadful way of getting married?' Jill murmured. 'Wasn't it a *mariage de convenance?* People don't expect love in marriage, so they have to find it somewhere else. I wonder tragedies don't happen oftener.'

Marthe Ludérac paused to consider this. 'Do they indeed happen more often with us than with the people who marry for love?' She considered and she put it away. 'I do not know. It is true that their marriage was arranged for them; by their mothers, who had been friends at school. But it had seemed a happy arrangement. My father, though he had no personal fortune, was a brilliant young scientist; his position was excellent; he was steady, devoted, serious. Had my mother loved him less, and had the other woman not come into their lives, they might have been happy. But it was not like that. It was a passion with her. She longed always for the love that he gave, at once,

helplessly, to the other woman. I was only twelve when the other came. But I knew what was happening.'

'Who was she? Do you remember her? Is she still alive?'

'Do I remember her? I can see her now, as plainly as I see you — with her smiling face and little fur cap and collar up there on that great terrace you spoke of, above the cathedral, in Angoulême. It was so I first saw her; on a winter day, when I was walking with my father. Yes. She is still alive. Is it not strange, when they have been dead for so long? But she was not to blame,' said Marthe Ludérac. 'She was helpless, too.'

'But she was to blame!' said Jill indignantly. 'She took another woman's husband away from her.'

Again Marthe Ludérac paused and considered. 'She did not take him. He took her. He was full of charm and power. She was very young; the young wife, married from her convent, of an old man; our neighbour; a friend of my father's father. How can one blame her? I saw how she struggled and resisted. For a long year her resistance lasted. He struggled too. By nature he was a loyal man. I saw it all,' Marthe Ludérac repeated.

'And your mother — did she not see?'

'At first, nothing. It was her happiest year. Can you understand that? He was more loving to her through all that year than he had ever been. She was his refuge. I understood it well. It was because he was so full of

fear — and of pity — that he clung to her with his passionate, agonized tenderness.'

Something shot into Jill's heart at that; not a thought, not even a recollection. It was only a trail of sharpness; a flickering light on the horizon; a far, shrill cry. Marthe Ludérac spoke on and held her mind.

'I was so young; but I knew when the struggle ceased. Not as a woman would know; but the essential; that my father was unfaithful; that they were lovers. I was terrified. I must have understood, instinctively, the dark forces in my mother's nature, and to what extremes they might carry her. I loved my father dearly; perhaps I loved him more than I loved her; but it was for her sake that I helped him to blind her still; a childish, half-conscious complicity. I was always there between them. One night, I remember, I pretended to be very ill — so that he should not leave her. But if she did not know, it was because she would not let herself. At the end everyone knew — Joseph, the friends who came to the house. I saw it in their faces. My father and his mistress must have seen it, too. Their hearts, too, must have been full of fear.'

Marthe Ludérac raised her hands and held them before her face and looked at them for a moment; then she bowed her forehead upon them. 'My father's mistress became *enceinte*. I did not understand what had happened to her, but I knew that she was desperate. I met her once, in the garden of the house. Their apartment was in the same house as ours. It was early spring, but very warm. She was walking under the

trees in a pink dress. She must have seen the grief and pity in my face, for she took me by the hand and we walked up and down together, saying not a word. She was in despair. I knew it. It was soon after that, perhaps a few mornings after, that she came to see my father. She did not ask for my mother. She asked only to see my father. I was in the room opposite and saw Joseph let her into my father's bureau. I knew that she should not have come. I knew that there was danger. Joseph knew it, too. He stood and looked at me as if he would have asked me to do something; and then he went away, leaving me there. I was standing looking at the closed door when my mother came down the passage, very quickly as though she had been called. She did not ask me a question. She stopped short and fixed her eyes on my face, and then without one word she went into the bureau and shut the door. She found them in each other's arms. My father kept his pistols in a case on the bookshelves, next the door. She took the weapon and fired at my father and turned the second bullet against herself. All over the house the shots were heard. Then I went in and saw them.'

'Oh, no; — oh, no —' Jill muttered. She, too, hid her face.

'My father lay there, dead,' said Marthe Ludérac. 'His mistress knelt beside him. She wore the pink dress and when she staggered up all the front was covered with his blood. My mother was lying on a chair near the door. She was moaning, and half her face seemed shot away. That was how I found them.'

'What did you do?' Jill whispered.

'I held my mother. I called. There was no need to call. Everybody was running to us. Everybody had heard. The room at once was full of people. Joseph and his wife were there; and the old husband — crying — crying. — He took his wife away. He was tender to her; he is a good old man. — And the doctor and the police. They carried my mother to her room. I went with them. They always let me stay with her. They felt that I should be calm, and that they could trust me. From the first,' said Marthe Ludérac, and she put down her hands and turned her eyes on Jill, 'strength was given to me.'

Jill sat silent. The sense of awe, of distance, crept over her again. Her young, jocund face had a strained, strange look.

'I distress you too much,' said Marthe Ludérac, considering her gently. 'And now you have heard all my story.'

'No, no; — not all. I want to hear it to the end,' Jill said faintly, again putting her hand on Marthe Ludérac's. 'I want to hear how you and she lived here, when you brought her back. I want to hear what you did for all those years. You were not quite alone? You had Joseph. I did not know that Joseph was your servant.'

'Yes. He came from Buissac, with my mother, when she married. He has always been in my life, good Joseph. We could give them no money, but he and his wife, who was living then, followed us and took

care of us. I do not know what would have become of us without them. All their little savings they spent in our service.'

'I thought he was Madame de Lamouderie's servant. But go on, dear Marthe. Your mother taught you the harp, you told me. She was well enough to teach you.'

'Yes; she was often well enough for that. It was her great solace. And as I grew older I could be more of a companion for her. I read to her. We walked a great deal in the woods; on the mountains; down on the island. The island was a favourite walk of hers; that is one reason why I love it so. — I was always with her; day and night. She could not bear to be left alone for one moment. The terror was always lying in wait for her, but, together, we could keep it at bay. At night we slept in the same bed and I held her in my arms till she could sleep. The terror came much nearer at night. Rest was difficult for her. She often wept and there was the frenzy to fear when she yielded to her grief. I used to sing to her; old songs — *Sur le pont d'Avignon; Les Filles de La Rochelle* — and she would at last fall asleep. Yes,' Marthe Ludérac repeated, now with a strange, stern calm, 'strength was given to me. We even had many happy hours together.'

This, then, was the celestial, thought Jill. She felt herself bathed in its terrible beauty.

CHAPTER XVI

The Friends

'I MUST go now,' said Marthe Ludérac. For a long time they had sat side by side, silent, and pressing Jill's hand, with a deep sigh, she released it and rose.

'Yes, you must go,' said Jill vaguely. 'May I call you Marthe?'

'Will you?'

'I think of you as Marthe — and you must call me Jill.'

'Jill,' said Marthe Ludérac gently, looking into her eyes. She pronounced the word with a soft French *g*. 'Jill,' she repeated. 'My friend.'

Jill nodded, smiling faintly. 'That's it. You've got it at last. It seems a long time, doesn't it? Though it was only the other day we met.'

'Yes. It seems a long time. I did not know then that there were people in the world like you,' said Marthe Ludérac, still gently considering her.

'And what are we going to do?' said Jill. 'That's what I want to ask you. What's going to become of the friends? How can I go away and leave you?'

'But' — Marthe Ludérac, her eyes so deeply, so gently considering her, hesitated — 'when your husband's work is finished, you will go? Is not that so?'

'Yes. And perhaps even before.' Jill stood looking down. 'Does it mean that we are to part?'

'I think it must mean that.'

Jill brooded, and Marthe Ludérac looked at her. Presently, timidly she said — and Jill felt that she had been seeking consolation for them both — 'It is not something lost, Jill. It is something gained, is it not? I never thought to have what you have given me. But it is mine, now, and it will be with me to the end.'

'Yes; but life is day after day,' Jill muttered. 'It's every day, over and over again, that one needs bread. You are so lonely. So terribly lonely.'

'No; not so lonely.' Marthe Ludérac spoke in quiet protest. 'There is Madame de Lamouderie; there is Joseph; there are my dear animals. Our *femme de ménage*, Madame Jeannin, lives in the hut below the Manoir and I am fond of her and often see her and her little boy. And there is my work in Bordeaux, full of interest. And my music, best of all. I practise my music for hours and hours, every day, Jill. Mine is not an empty life.'

'You may be able to bear it for yourself,' said Jill, 'but I can hardly bear it for you.'

'But you must not make me think,' said Marthe Ludérac, taking her hand again and slightly shaking it as she recalled her earlier warning, 'that it is an unhappy thing for you to have come to Buissac. If you go, feeling so sorrowful, that would indeed be hard for me to bear. No, Jill, no; it is something gained.

And our lives could not run in the same channel. Do not be sad.'

'I'm afraid I am, though. Very sad,' said Jill. She held Marthe Ludérac's hand and they moved towards the door. She was wondering whether she should ever see her again. What would Marthe feel if she were to tell her that she and Dick might leave Buissac next morning? 'But no,' she said to herself, 'Dick will be all right again when he comes in from his walk.'

They had gone together to the door, and, pausing there, Marthe still seemed to defer the farewell. She glanced at Jill and her face altered. 'There is one more thing I would speak of with you,' she said, and Jill saw that she nerved herself.

'Yes? What is it, Marthe?'

'It is something I wish to ask.' Standing there, her eyes on Jill's, her face resumed the look it had worn on first entering.

'But of course you may ask anything.'

'It is this. Only a little thing.' She tried to speak calmly, but her voice was shallow, breathless. 'Will your husband, please, not come in the mornings when I read? Will you ask him? It is a little thing. He will grant it to you. Madame de Lamouderie has so few joys. It grieves me to see her happiness in being with your husband spoiled for her.'

It seemed, indeed, a little thing, but Jill stood there, astonished; she did not know what to say. 'But — he thought it would be more cheerful for her — to listen

to you while he paints. — He gets so absorbed when he paints.' It was not the truth. The colour came into her face as she said it.

'It does not make her cheerful,' said Marthe Ludérac quickly. 'It makes her very unhappy. Very angry, too — very angry with me, though she tries to hide it.'

'But what have you to do with it!' What had she to do with it? As Jill heard her own unguarded question the blood mounted hotly in her cheeks.

'I am in the way. She is very much discomposed. She does not know what to do,' Mademoiselle Ludérac murmured, and, as if the warmth of Jill's flush had touched her own pale cheeks, the faint, intense colour rose to them. 'It is as if a toy had been given to a child, and then withdrawn from it. It is not kind to treat her so! Not kind!' said Marthe with a sudden startling vehemence.

'He doesn't mean to be unkind.' All sorts of thoughts were racing through Jill's mind. Why not tell Marthe, boldly, that Dick went up to see her? But at the mere thought of such an avowal her flush deepened. 'He is full of caprices, you know. All artists are, I suppose; and he probably felt that he could work more peacefully — more happily, if there was reading going on. — But of course I'll tell him. He won't dream of going when you are there when he knows it gives you pain.'

She had not helped her friend. She had, indeed, for a moment, reduced her to speechlessness. She stood

there gazing, the faint colour fixed in her cheek, and she murmured hurriedly, putting her hand on the door, as if with an impulse of escape: 'But it must not be for me!'

'No; no — of course not!' It would be intolerable to part thus, Jill felt. She would say anything to reassure her; to bring her back. 'I'll make it quite all right; — I promise you. Is she really angry with you, poor old thing? What a shame, though. And how horrid for you. It's stopped raining, Marthe. What if I came with you and saw her now? It might cheer her up.'

This, at last, was a happy thought. The distress on Marthe Ludérac's face melted to gratitude. 'Will you? It is not too late? It would be the greatest joy to her.'

'Of course it's not too late. It's not nearly tea-time yet.'

It took but a moment for Jill to equip herself. 'I live with one foot out of doors always,' she said, smiling, as she took up cap, coat, and stick from the chair where she had last tossed them. 'I'm very untidy, you see. But it saves time. It's everything to be able to get out at once, isn't it?'

'It is.' Marthe Ludérac, watching her, smiled irrepressibly.

'That's what it comes to,' Jill thought, as they went downstairs. 'She's afraid of Dick, and he's afraid of her. How absurd it is. But now things will go better.'

The day was chill and sullen. The wind had dropped and the river ran, not turbulently, but in vast, heaving eddies, like molten steel. The brooding sky was pierced, far away, over the plains, beyond the jut of cliff, by one sharp lance of light. Jill glanced at Marthe as she went beside her. Her face, with its wide, forward gaze, was fixed before her. She moved swiftly, with a long, light step. One saw her, set in such a landscape, oddly dominating it. She made Jill think of the passionate *château*, and of the patient church. She seemed an historic, no, a symbolic figure, striding lightly, swiftly across the French centuries, with a message for all time. But here they were, she and Jill, in their own small place, and there was a corner to turn, a difficulty to evade, to forget, if possible. The old lady had offered an escape.

'When did Madame de Lamouderie come to live with you?' Jill asked. They had gone in silence along the village highway and now, following the *grande route*, were on the ascent.

'After my mother's death,' said Marthe. Jill saw that she, too, found relief with the old lady. 'We met through Médor. She is very fond of animals, you know. She used to stop me and pat his head and I felt that she was sorry for me. She was living very sadly, very poorly, in that hut below the Manoir I told you of. The old grandmother, who is dead now, used to be a house-maid in her family. I was free then to seek work, and my home was there, empty for half the year. So it seemed natural that

two unfortunate people should make a common *foyer*. It is sad that I have to leave her for all those winter months. But Joseph, whom I leave with her, is absolutely to be trusted. I can pay him a wage now, the good old man. And I have left the Manoir to him, since I have no family. That is a recompense to him for all his years of devotion. If I outlive him, it will go to his relations in Buissac.'

Jill was recollecting Madame de Lamouderie's references, long ago, to 'My landlady: my housekeeper,' and an old distaste and irony brushed across her charitable mood. She was simply vulgar, the poor old countess. She had felt a *bourgeoise* landlady to be a more decorative adjunct than a *bourgeoise* friend.

'Do you know anything of her life, and why she came to live here?' she asked.

Marthe Ludérac, considering for a moment, turned her eyes then on Jill with a slight smile. 'She has told me a great deal, but I do not feel that I know much. She had misfortunes; terrible misfortunes; that is evident. Her husband was involved in financial difficulties and I fear that he committed suicide. But I do not know. I have never questioned her. She prefers not to be questioned. And when one is as old as that a mist comes easily, I think, in which one can wrap oneself; with which one can shut out the past. That she had fallen into destitution, even misery, was but too plainly to be seen from the state in which I found her. Yet she was always beautiful, you know,' said Marthe, again smiling. 'Always, even, *bien mise*.

A great distinction has survived everything, has it not?'

'Yes. She is beautiful; and distinguished, in spite of everything,' mused Jill. The 'everything' to which she referred, however, was not destitution or misfortune. The old lady was a person to whom one would forgive much. She wondered how much she had given Mademoiselle Ludérac to forgive.

Joseph opened to them at the Manoir. '*Du thé*, Joseph,' said Marthe Ludérac. A stranger might have said that she spoke very tersely to the old man. But Jill was no longer a stranger. It was because affection was so secure that the tone was so short. Joseph's reply revealed as much.

'Mademoiselle will not drink tea herself.'

'Well, what of that? Madame will drink it, and Madame la comtesse.'

'It is not wholesome, so much tea. Moreover, the milk has not yet come,' grumbled the old man.

'But there is milk still left from this morning!' cried Marthe, and her capacity for sudden vehemence was touching and amusing.

'Only a half cup. The animals have had the rest.'

'That is quite sufficient. A half cup is all that will be necessary. — And the *petits beurres*. — *Allons, allons*, Joseph. Do not stand there arguing. Let the tea be ready at half-past four.'

'Since Mademoiselle does not drink it herself, I have no more to say,' Joseph replied with an air of

grim concession, and Marthe laughed: '*A la bonne heure!*'

'You know, I really ought to get back to Buissac, to give Dick his tea,' said Jill when Joseph had departed. 'He may be in by then.'

'But it is hardly half-past three now. It would grieve Madame de Lamouderie if you did not have a cup of tea with her. I will tell Joseph to bring it at four. — And I will leave you now to be with her.'

'But — I'll see you again — before I go?'

The menace of immediate departure from Buissac had not yet lifted and Jill's voice must have struck Marthe as unreasonably fearful; for suddenly, warmed perhaps to an unaccustomed gaiety by the encounter with Joseph, she smiled, fondly, radiantly, upon her. 'Yes, you will see me again.' It was as if Jill had released all her imprisoned girlhood. 'I will wait for you here, when you come out. Of course, you will see me!' she said.

CHAPTER XVII

The Sibyl

JILL on entering the drawing-room was at once aware, though the light was failing, of the gloomy, resentful gaze that the old lady fixed upon her. It was evidently Marthe who was expected, and her welcome would have been a chill one. When her advancing figure disclosed its identity, the change of expression on Madame de Lamouderie's face was almost ludicrous. Jill pressed her back into her chair as, impeded by the rug wrapped round her knees, she tried to struggle to her feet.

'No, no, don't get up,' she said, laughing. 'I've just come for a little chat. — I'll sit here. This will do beautifully. — It's such a dismal day. I wanted to hear some of your wonderful stories.'

'Ah — this is what it is to have a friend! — This is what it is to have a true friend!' said Madame de Lamouderie in tones of almost vindictive assertion. 'No one cares for me but you! I am abandoned by all the rest!'

'No, you're not,' Jill retorted, smiling upon her. 'I've just walked up with Mademoiselle Ludérac. She hasn't abandoned you, for one. And since it's probably going to go on raining, I expect you'll see Dick again to-morrow afternoon.'

These two pieces of information left the old lady gaping and, for the moment, at a loss.

'To-morrow afternoon? It is in the mornings that he has now elected to come.' She had seized, at all events, the happy implication.

'Well, I'm afraid he didn't find his plan succeeded. He didn't find you more cheerful when you were being read to, though he did find you most awfully amusing and witty.'

'Witty? He found me witty? *Tant mieux!*' The old lady, though aware of a change of fortune, spoke bitterly. 'He did not find me changed, that is certain. And why should he? I see Marthe day after day, month after month. I have no need to see more of her. It was him I wanted to see. And he knows it!'

'Well, it's all right now,' said Jill soothingly, though she was a little taken aback.

'Ah; is it indeed all right?' said the old lady. 'So you may say; and we shall see. — And what had Marthe to do with you that you came up together?' she added with a change of tone.

Jill considered her for a moment. Would one be able to go on being sorry for her, she wondered. This might be but the fretfulness of a sulky, froward child; but it might be something more unpleasant. There was a hint of peremptoriness in her question that she did not at all relish.

'Mademoiselle Ludérac came to see me,' she said, looking very gravely at her. 'She came to tell me the story of her life. She wanted me to know.'

Madame de Lamouderie as she heard these words showed an altered countenance. They sobered her. She was drawn outside the consideration of her own griefs. 'She told you?'

'Yes. About her father and her mother.'

'Why did she tell you?' said Madame de Lamouderie after a moment.

'She felt that I was fond of her and ought to know.'

Madame de Lamouderie looked into the fire. 'I should not have told you had I been she. I should tell nobody of such a thing.'

'Not even a friend? It seems to me just what one would tell to a friend.'

'No.' The old lady shook her head. 'Not even to a friend. What is a friend? What does Marthe know of you? Such avowals put one at a disadvantage.'

'A disadvantage? I don't understand you.'

'Our sorrows are always disadvantages to us,' said Madame de Lamouderie, and as she gazed into the smouldering fire she looked like a sibyl, old, wise, and sinister, drawn in black and silver on the failing day. 'They count against us with the world. They make us of so much less value and consequence.'

'Perhaps that was what Mademoiselle Ludérac thought. Perhaps that was why she felt I ought to know — lest I should think her of more consequence than she was!' Jill spoke with her measured gravity, though the form of her words was ironic. 'She can't think so now. It may be true of the world, what you say; but it's not true of decent people.'

'The world is made up of what you call decent people — *des gens fort honnêtes*.' Madame de Lamouderie could match Jill in gravity. It was a new aspect of herself she showed her as she sat there, brooding, with lowered eyes. 'Put them together, and they become a herd; and a herd is the cruellest thing in nature. It scents out weakness. It hunts it down and tramples on it. All sorrow is a weakness and weakness is the one thing one must not show the world if one wishes to keep one's skin whole and one's bones unbroken.' An extraordinary bitterness infused her voice.

'You and I could never treat Mademoiselle Ludérac like that, however many people you added to us,' said Jill. Madame de Lamouderie did not frighten her. The aspect of life she put before her was so alien to her apprehension that she felt it strange rather than dismaying. 'We'd protect her if the herd tried to trample her. We'd never trample too.'

'Ah, I do not know. I do not know,' the old lady repeated, not raising her eyes. 'Nor do you, *ma petite*. Human nature is a singular thing; and you are very ignorant of it, let me tell you. We all fear the herd. We all fear to oppose its impulses, lest we be victims. — Fear; ambition; jealousy; — which of us, to gain what we crave, or to avoid what we dread, would not take advantage of the disinherited creature? Marthe Ludérac has, through her misfortunes, been disinherited. No one will know her. No one will marry her.

She has withered on the branch of life. Better that she should not draw attention to herself.'

Jill sat opposite the grim old creature. Her happy, tilted lips, her smiling eyes, were strangely hardened as she tried to think out a way of escape from these problems that she saw, for the first time, as menacing, yet that her heart so deeply contradicted. Unconsciously, as she pondered, she unknotted her silk scarf and threw it back over her shoulder, and the old lady, observing the gesture, raised her eyes and examined her, with a cold, profound scrutiny. Jill did not see it. Her eyes were on the fire.

'No; it's not true — ' she said at last. 'It's not true, when people love each other. People do love each other. They do, often, sacrifice themselves for the sake of love. Even in Marthe's case, I don't believe they meant to be so cruel. It just happened so.'

'It would so happen — to the daughter of a murderess.'

'Her mother wasn't a common murderess. It was a pitiful crime. I expect lots of people were dreadfully sorry for her.'

'Ah, I do not blame her mother.' The old lady was terse indeed to-day.

'Well, I blame her. I'm dreadfully sorry for her; but I blame her. You ought not to kill your husband — even if he *has* been unfaithful to you!'

'Ought not!' Madame de Lamouderie laughed. 'Such "oughts" are straws in a conflagration when jealousy flames. It is precisely as I was telling you

just now. We do not know ourselves till temptation comes. Madame Ludérac could not have known that she was capable of murder until she saw her rival in her husband's arms.'

'I suppose not. No, of course she couldn't. — But there must have been something wrong about her all the same. It was so senseless, so vindictive of her, wasn't it? What I mean,' Jill pondered, her eyes on the fire, 'is that she didn't really love him enough.'

'Not enough! You do not know what you are saying! Not enough! It was because she loved him too well!'

'Not in the way I mean. If she had loved him in the way I mean, she would have been able to understand a little; — and even be sorry for him, however miserable he had made her.'

'Sorry for him! *Par exemple!* No, in such a case I can see myself take up the pistol! But I should have shot his mistress first! And I am one who *can* love, let me tell you!'

Jill looked up at that. The great devouring eyes were on her and made her think of an astronomical photograph she had once seen; the dark disc of the sun with flames flickering round it. She could not interpret their gaze, but had she been of a timid and retreating nature she would have shrunk from it. Jill, however, was not disposed at any time to turn back before a five-barred gate.

'If you killed them, it wouldn't be because you loved so much, but because you didn't love enough,'

she said, considering her opponent. 'If being in love was her excuse for killing him, then it was his excuse, too. He couldn't help it if he loved somebody else.'

'He could not help it! — And she could not help it! Well and good! So be it! But let us hear no more of blame and who was right and wrong!' cried the old lady. 'There is no right and wrong in such a case, to those who are composed of flesh and blood and not of *eau sucrée*. You do not know what love is. You have never felt passion. You are a child — a simple child! That has been made very plain to me more than once — for where there is no jealousy there is no passion. — These are dark themes, and since you do not understand them — or yourself — we will talk no more of them,' said Madame de Lamouderie, in such commanding tones that Jill gazed at her in astonishment. Not only was Madame de Lamouderie commanding her; but with a sub-flavour of insolence. She evidently believed her to be composed of *eau sucrée*. She was herself one of the people — Jill saw it in a flash of insight — who, in her ambiguous past, had scented out and trampled on weakness. Well, she had miscalculated her victim in this case.

Jill was not angry. She was displeased. She reflected for a moment and then rose. 'No; we won't talk about it any more. And it's time for me to go now. Good-bye,' she said.

It was almost pitiful, but almost repulsive, too, to see how quickly Madame de Lamouderie could crumble. Dismay withered her face; horror widened

her eyes; her hands grasped the arms of her chair on either side. 'But you will not leave me like this? I have hardly seen you. You have talked of nothing but Marthe. Have you no longer any feeling for anyone but Marthe?' she cried. 'Do not go, not yet! I implore of you!'

'But, you know, I think you were rather rude,' said Jill, standing there above her with her hands in her pockets. 'I don't like people to be rude to me.'

'Rude to you! My angel! No! It would be impossible! It was carelessly that I spoke.' Madame de Lamouderie put out her hand and laid it on Jill's dress. 'It was not of you I was thinking . . . You are my ideal of all that is wise and enchanting in womanhood! — No; I am an unfortunate and embittered old woman, battered by the storms of life. You will not be so unkind as to punish me for my bad temper!'

'Of course I don't want to punish you — or anyone,' Jill said, and as Joseph at that moment entered with the tea-tray, she sank down again into her chair, murmuring, 'Only a few moments then, because I really must get back to Dick.'

'Tea?' said the old lady. Her cheek was darkly flushed. She turned her eyes on Joseph and spoke in a haggard voice. 'It is too early for tea. Five o'clock is the proper time, as I have had occasion to tell you before.'

'Mademoiselle ordered it for four,' said Joseph, unmoved, setting down the tray.

'It's quite right. I told her I couldn't stay, and she

said she'd have it sent in at four,' Jill explained. 'She knows you like to give me tea.'

'She is thoughtful. She is considerate. She is my good angel,' said the old lady, still disarrayed, watching Joseph leave the room.

'She really is, you've hit the mark this time,' said Jill, laughing a little despite herself. 'You know it's very wrong of you to talk about being abandoned when you have her to care for you.'

'Do not lecture me! Do not preach to me! I cannot bear it! I can bear no more to-day!' cried the old lady. Her relief at having bridged the chasm that had threatened was so great that a shaft of archness shot into her glance, giving it the cajoling charm of a naughty, impenitent child's. 'Everything has gone against me to-day — to begin with your husband! He has a hard heart, that man! He is a bright, destructive Lucifer! Yes; I assert it! Even Marthe was unkind to me at lunch. She is not a saint, Marthe; — oh, no. You do not know how severely she can speak sometimes; — and with a gloomy brow. If you, too, go against me, take me *au pied de la lettre*, there will be nothing left for me to do but to cast myself down into the river from the precipice! And I warn you, you calm young Englishwoman, that I am sometimes near doing it! In old age the blood becomes cold and sluggish; the old cling torpidly to life. But I am not like the others. My blood can still rebel. You would not like to have the death of an old Frenchwoman — even of such a wicked, foolish old woman — on your conscience, would you?'

She had succeeded. She was making Jill laugh. She was happy, almost happy, in her triumph, if only for the fleeting moment.

'I suppose you are wicked,' said Jill. 'But you are certainly very charming. I can't get really angry with you.'

'Ah, that is what I like to hear! Let me be charming to you and I care not how wicked you may think me! — not even if you think me more wicked than I am! That may be so, you know. I may make myself out worse than the reality. Perhaps I am not really a murderess!'

'Oh, I don't mind your being a murderess — not one bit!' Jill assured her. 'It's not that sort of thing I mind.'

'Did I call you simple? Just now? When you were so displeased with me? You are simple; I repeat it. But you are also very shrewd, very wise and shrewd, my dear young friend. You are as well aware as the most sophisticated misanthrope that it is the large crimes of which we prefer to be thought capable, rather than the small, mean ones; — the crimes of the individual, not the crimes of the herd; — eh?'

'Yes. I suppose it's that,' Jill smiled, stirring her tea, for while she had listened to Madame de Lamouderie she had poured out tea for them both. The old lady had forgotten it in her absorption. 'It's nice, I suppose, to feel oneself a tiger, rather than a sheep.'

'Precisely. Think of me as a tigress. A lonely, sad old tigress, tamed by you,' said Madame de Lamouderie.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Torrent

MARTHE LUDERAC had kept her promise. She was waiting for Jill in the hall. The garden door stood open behind her and the pale light of the fading afternoon was spread about her form. Her face still wore its look of radiancy, and Jill, as she saw her, realized that if the day to her had been strange and wonderful, to Marthe Ludérac it must have been even more so. There was a lovely freshness, as of resurrection, about her.

She raised one finger to her lips and whispered: 'You have worked the miracle. I heard that.'

'It almost needed a miracle,' Jill whispered back. Now that she looked at Marthe standing in her radiance, she felt suddenly as if she had escaped from darkness; as if darkness hung about her and was dispelled only by Marthe. The old lady had disturbed her, profoundly disturbed her. She was aware of this as she had not been while she was with her. It seemed to come to her from the sense of contrast. Marthe's radiance lifted her above the realms of darkness; but they were there, behind her, within her, even; — for did she not feel the deep, fang-like ache of an unseen wound? 'May I come with you into the garden for a moment?' she said.

'Yes. Let us walk there. It is so beautiful there now,' said Marthe Ludérac.

Time, embalmed time, was with them in the garden. The past walked with them, Marthe's past, her mother's long dead past. These were the very flowers, Jill thought as they went, that her mother's young eyes had looked at. Nothing in the garden had been changed since the young Marthe Jacquard had walked there. A mother-of-pearl sky was above their heads and along the paths the gnarled old apple-trees were full of thick, pale leaf-buds. A pear-tree was already in flower and on its topmost branch a thrush was singing. The sense of tears, and fear, and joy, were strangely mingled in Jill's mood. She walked along the mossy paths, her arm passed within Marthe's. She felt that Marthe was very happy. Her happiness was part of the joy and fear.

'Tell me,' said Jill, looking at her, and wondering at the beauty of her face, 'is Madame de Lamouderie often very cross with you? Horrid, I mean?'

'Horrid? Why should you think so? Has she been disagreeable to you?' Marthe smiled in asking it as though they must not take the old lady seriously.

'No; not exactly disagreeable. She can be so charming, can't she? I can't help being fond of her myself, sometimes. But she can be horrid, too. You must be very fond of her indeed to go on with her year after year.'

'I think I am very fond of her,' said Marthe, after a moment, and more gravely.

'But not exactly for herself, Marthe, is it? Isn't it really because she needs you so? Isn't it more because you're sorry for her? — As if she were a wounded cat? A cat who had been chased by the boys?'

'Yes, perhaps it is really like that.' Marthe's thoughtful eyes dwelt on her. 'A poor, old, wounded cat. How could one not be fond of it?'

'And what if it were to bite your hand?' Jill pondered, looking down. Tiger or cat? The trivial, exasperated creature; or the dangerous beast, crouching there in darkness, ready to spring upon a scented weakness? Could one take Madame de Lamouderie quite lightly? — and put her in her place with a sharp cuff on the ear? 'What if it were to bite your hand?' she repeated. 'Just when you were stroking it and believing it was really loving you?'

Marthe Ludérac was grave now. Jill knew that, though she did not look up at her. And she was not surprised. She knew too well, no doubt, of what her cat was capable. 'One would not blame it,' she said.

'Wouldn't one? A cat that bites the hand that helps it? I should blame it — and feel like putting it out of the door!'

'I do not blame easily,' said Marthe Ludérac after a pause. 'I am myself often very irritable and ill-tempered. I have a hot temper, Jill; — did you guess that? I, too, can be disagreeable. Sometimes I fear for myself when I remember what I inherit.' She paused again. 'If you found her difficult just now, it

was in part my fault. I was very harsh and short with her to-day.'

'She deserved harshness and shortness; — I'll answer for it!'

'Perhaps she did. One need not apportion blame. We will not pick my old friend to pieces, Jill. Do you know' — she looked round into Jill's face — 'I often feel that to speak ill of people is to take some of their life from them. You know what I mean? — To recognize, with another, a person's faults, is as if one took some of his life away.'

'Yes.' Jill was doubtful. 'But there *are* faults.'

'What is a fault? What are her faults? Are we not all the same? Do we not all crave love? — To be loved most? It seems to me that we are all one in that; — all life one torrent of longing, rushing in the same bed; and what we call faults in one another are the rocks and impediments against which we dash ourselves. Do you not think of it like that? I think so much alone that I do not know whether I seem eccentric in what I say.'

Marthe's face, turned so gently, so ardently upon her, against the pearly sky, was as lovely as the pear-blossoms.

'I've never thought about anything of that sort at all,' Jill said, meditating. 'A torrent? That makes us quite helpless, doesn't it? Isn't there another side to us? The side that chooses which way it will go?'

'Yes; yes' — with her ardour, her gentleness, Marthe Ludérac nodded — 'but that other side we can

only find when we have seen that we are one. It is a mystery. Until we can see that we are one, we remain mere torrent, conditioned by the bed and by the impediments. We are only selves, only free selves, when we have seen that we are one. Then we cannot blame. We can only try to take the rock away.'

'I suppose you are very religious. It all sounds like religion,' Jill murmured, rather helplessly. 'I'm afraid I'm not a bit religious. Though I've been confirmed, of course, and go to church when I'm at home, and all that sort of thing.'

'Religious? No, I am not religious. My family have never been *pratiquants*. My father was a free-thinker and her church meant little to my mother,' said Marthe Ludérac. 'Perhaps if I had been taught more of religion in my childhood, I should not have had to think for myself things that are quite familiar to religious people. — But I am keeping you, Jill. It is so strange to have someone to whom I can speak my thoughts that I am forgetting. You must go back to Buissac.'

'Yes, I'm afraid I must. Can we meet somewhere to-morrow? I want you to go on telling me about the torrent. — Would it make one feel kinder to oneself, as well as to other people, if one thought of oneself as a torrent? Aren't we inclined to be too kind already?'

'Not more kind,' Marthe smiled, shaking her head. 'More tolerant, perhaps; less frightened. And it is all to the good not to be frightened, do you not think so,

Jill? — One looks quietly at some black thought or feeling that comes to one, and one can say: — Do not be disturbed; this is the torrent. While you can look at it and recognize it for what it is, it will not carry you away. — But you have no black thoughts, Jill.'

'Oh, haven't I, just! Little do you know me! I feel a perfect worm sometimes! Nicer to be a torrent than a worm! Where shall I see you to-morrow, Marthe?'

'Shall we meet on the island?' Marthe looked fondly at her, holding her by the hand. 'That poor woman, of whom I told you, is in bed with rheumatism, and I take her goat and kid down to the meadow every afternoon for her and bring them up again. The thickets of hawthorn and alder are what the mother goat loves.'

'Oh, that would be heavenly! I love that island. I shall always see you as I first did there, walking under the poplars with your cat in your arms — a much safer sort of cat, Marthe; though it isn't nearly so charming and amusing as the other one, I admit! — No; — I won't be uncharitable! Are you fond of watching birds? There were some lovely wagtails, the grey and yellow sort, when I was there that day. I never saw so many together before.'

'The *bergeronnettes?* Yes, I often see them. They have a note like the sound of water lapping on the stones. I am very fond of them; but there are many birds I know by sight and by their song, whose names I do not know.'

'I know all our English birds, but some of your

French warblers are new to me. The chiff-chaff is singing already; that makes me feel so at home. In England he seems to belong to us.'

'They are little rain-coloured birds, the *fauvettes*, are they not? My mother loved them best of all and said that some of their notes were like the harp. You will have to teach me their names, Jill.'

As they talked they had come round the corner of the house and before them the grove of tall sycamores made a roof of breaking green on a golden sky.

'There's a chiff-chaff singing now — silly little darling,' said Jill; — 'and, oh, there's a willow-warbler; — listen, Marthe. Isn't he lovely? Yes; it is just like a harp, a far-away harp, rippling down like that!'

Jill had stopped to listen, and Marthe Ludérac scanned her uplifted face.

'You, too, love birds so much?' she said, when the willow-warbler had sung his wistful, joyful, lonely, descending scale.

'Oh — I care more for them — looking at them, listening to them — than for anything!' cried Jill.

'Even more than for hunting the fox?' Mademoiselle Ludérac questioned, smiling gently.

'Oh — *what* a shame!' Jill exclaimed. 'Oh, that's *too* bad, Marthe! — No; I feel you'll never really forgive me!'

But Marthe Ludérac took her hand, as she had done while she told her story that afternoon, and put it against her cheek for a moment, saying, 'In time, I know, this dear heart will be kind to everything.'

It had been the loveliest ending to the day, yet Jill, as she sped down the stony road in the twilight of the forest, felt the tears rising again and again to her eyes. This dazed, heavy, submerged sensation had oppressed her when Dick had come to her, and all the afternoon she had been aware of an almost feverish susceptibility. But even if she had caught cold, even if she were feverish, Dick, Marthe, and the old lady had all been too much for her. She wanted to lie down and cry, not so much for the tragedy and grimness of which she had partaken as for the memory of the gentle, lovely things: the song of the willow-warbler; Marthe's face of resurrection as she had held her hand against her cheek. It almost frightened her to know how completely her longing was now fulfilled; to know that Marthe Ludérac was so completely her friend. It laid a responsibility upon her for which, at the moment, she seemed to feel herself too weak. And under everything was the ache of the fang-like, unseen wound.

On the lower road the river, flooded over its grassy margins and risen high against its wall, made a deep roar beside her as she went. The sky behind her was golden, but before her a roof of dark cloud was lifted over a band of cold, intense rose colour. How long it seemed since she had seen Dick! And what was she to say to him? It seemed to her, as she climbed the stair at the Ecu d'Or that she could not find the strength or control to tell him of all that had happened to her since they had met. But when she saw him there, sitting in the gloomy evening light of their

little room, and saw that his eyes were large with fatigue and anxiety, she knew that she could not rest until she had shared all with Dick. She had always wanted to share Marthe Ludérac with him; had always wanted him to see her as she saw her; but that he should share and see was now part of that new sense of responsibility that had come to her: — Dick and Marthe must see each other. She owed it to them both that they should see each other. What basis could there be for her friendship with Marthe unless Dick shared it?

'My darling child — where have you been!' said Graham. He came to her and put his arms around her and she sank on the sofa beside him, and laid her head on his shoulder and suddenly began to cry. And such a strange foolish little thing came first. 'Oh, Dick — I'm so afraid you'll be displeased with me! — If we stay — if you've decided to stay — please say you won't go up in the mornings, when Marthe reads!'

'What do you mean, my dearest? — Displeased with you? Why should I be?' Poor Dick was really frightened by her plight.

But she could not stop herself from sobbing on. 'She's unhappy about it; — because you made the old lady so miserable. — And I promised her, too, that I'd meet her on the island to-morrow. — Only, if we have to go —'

Dick was perfectly still — for one moment; only one. Then he said, very firmly, very rationally: 'But, Jill, what's the matter? You're ill, my dear. Your

hand is hot. Of course we will stay as long as you want to. — All that nonsense is over,' said Dick, with a strange, hard note in his voice.

'May we really? Really, Dick? — I'm upset, that is the truth of it. — No; I'm not ill; I may have caught a little cold, but I'm not ill. But I've been through a lot. And I'm awfully afraid I shall go on crying when I tell you about Marthe and her mother. — We are friends, now, Dick. She has told me everything. She cares for me as much, I think, as I care for her. And she's never had a friend before.'

'But not now. Don't tell me anything now. Let me put you to bed first, and have a good night's rest. Let's forget all about Mademoiselle Ludérac until to-morrow morning.'

But Jill could not bear that. She knew that she could not sleep until she had told Dick. And she drew herself up a little, though she still leaned on his shoulder, and dried her eyes to show him that she was calm, and then it all came; incoherently enough, yet clearly, too, to Graham sitting there, holding her; clearly, sharply, even dryly, so it seemed to him, in his great fatigue; like a series of etchings that Jill placed before him: Marthe Ludérac watching her father and his mistress; Marthe Ludérac coming into the room where her father lay dead; Marthe Ludérac holding her distraught mother through the nights and singing old songs to her so that she should sleep. It was with a remote sense of pain that he listened; detached and dispassionate he felt himself to be. It was, so he told

himself, of Jill that he was thinking; his dear Jill, involved in the darkness that Marthe Ludérac cast about her; the perplexity; the strain. Jill, afraid she had displeased him; Jill upset like this; her soft hair against his cheek; her hot hand in his. Was it not true, all the same, that they had better go to-morrow? If it could be for Jill's sake, not his own, that they were to go, what relief, what balm, would there not be in such an evasion! So his thought accompanied her story, cold, dry, yet agitated. And all the time the sense of strain was there; as if he were pressing against a shut door, a door insecurely shut, for which he found no lock; and from within which he felt the strength of an answering, hostile pressure. But he could count on his own strength.

He did not question Jill once; he made no comment on what she told. When she had finished, he sat silent; for so long that Jill turned her face on his shoulder and looked up at him and he knew at once that she expected to see tears in his eyes so that he said, hastily: 'Do you know what I'm going to do with you? Put you to bed and give you some aspirin and send for the doctor. You are evidently ill.'

'I should like to go to bed,' said Jill absently. She leaned her head back again. 'I don't want a doctor. — But I haven't told you yet about the old lady. She was very strange.'

'I don't want to hear about her. I don't want to hear any more about either of them. We've had our fill of horrors.'

'Oh — but it wasn't horrors, Dick. — That's just what it wasn't. Because Marthe was there, shining through everything.'

Graham stood up and drew her to her feet. 'Come on. To bed with you. They've given you a fever, between them.'

'No; I remember now; I must have caught his cold from that disgusting boy who dined next us two nights ago.' Jill went obediently with Graham up the stair. 'Don't you remember him; — the dark boy with dirty nails, who sneezed and blew his nose — or didn't blow it — all through dinner?'

'Yes. Damn him! I remember,' said Dick.

Next morning it was evident that Jill had the influenza. The local doctor was called in after lunch and pronounced upon her case. Warmth, quiet, nourishing food. There must be no question of leaving Buissac for a fortnight and he would come in and see Madame every day. Monsieur, no doubt, would not regret the enforced stay, for he had observed him often with his easel. He himself was something of an amateur and always made a point of going to the Salon, if it was open, when he was in Paris. Monsieur and Madame knew Paris? Well? It went without saying. Paris was the capital of the world.

He chattered until Graham became impatient. It was rarely that he had a case so interesting. Jill was charming with her russet locks tossed and the rose-coloured bow on her breast. She was sorry for the poor man, and amused by him and looked at him very

kindly. He was long-jointed, dry, apprehensive, like a cicada, with prominent pale eyes behind great glasses. He sat, a hand on each thin knee, and talked eagerly of politics to the charming English pair. He assured them that all over France the Royalists were plotting for a return of the Bourbons. It behoved every true son of the Republic to be on his guard. Unfortunately for the Republic one could trust not one of her politicians. Monsieur le docteur Magnolles had the lowest opinion of them all. When at last he took himself off, Jill said that she would go to sleep.

'I'll stay with you, quietly, reading here,' said Graham. The sun was streaming into the room and it was very pleasant to sit by the window and look out.

'But I don't need you a bit, Dick,' said Jill. 'Amélie will come directly if I want anything; and I shan't; for I shall sleep till tea-time. It would keep me from sleeping if you sat there. Besides' — and Jill hesitated for one moment — 'there's poor Madame de Lamouderie longing for you.'

'Damn Madame de Lamouderie,' said Graham.

'But the portrait is sure to be so splendid, Dick. Don't give it up.'

'All right. I'll go up, then.'

'And Dick — couldn't you go round by the island? To tell Marthe, you know, that I'm not coming.'

'Oh, no, my dear,' said Dick cheerfully, as if he had foreseen this request; 'that's not necessary at all. And it would frighten the young lady out of her wits. You forget that there's no love lost between us.'

'But — I don't want it to stay like that, Dick.' Jill pressed her hand against her aching forehead. It was the responsibility — towards Marthe, towards Dick — and the memory, too, of a fang-like wound that made her head ache like this. Why not let them alone? But how unnatural not to tell Marthe when he would have to pass so near. The great thing was to keep everything quite natural; — was that not so? thought Jill. And why should Dick speak in that unfeeling tone after what she had told him yesterday? It hurt her to hear him. 'I mean, since she's my friend now, she must be yours, too, Dick. You must try for that. You can understand why she's afraid of people. I think you ought to go,' she murmured.

'All right. Just as you say,' said Graham. 'Only it will keep the old lady waiting, for it's nearly time now. And you know it won't induce a pleasant frame of mind in her if she hears I've had an assignation with Mademoiselle Ludérac on the island.'

Jill had not thought of this. She wondered. Her feverish mind fixed itself in its wonder. What was best to do? 'Would it upset her?' she again murmured.

'It would upset her most horribly,' said Graham with a laugh.

'Well, perhaps not, then.' What strange, deep relief was this? For herself? For Dick? For Marthe? Jill's mind drowsed with it. 'All right. I'll go to sleep now,' she said.

CHAPTER XIX

Still Tempest

SO Graham started. Spring had returned again. The river still roared under the wall; but the sky was cloudless, a vast, blue sky against which trees and cliffs and villages glittered in the wind and sunlight. But though so blue, so glittering, the day was tempestuous; a Vulcan chained; such a fury of implicit power lay beneath its gladness. The great wind came swooping down the gorges and the edges of the waves were sharp with gold and silver.

While Graham was still on the lower road he saw Marthe Ludérac descending to the island, high on the promontory. She was leading a goat — even at his distance he could see the careful, tentative steps of the creature as it followed her — and on her shoulder she carried a young kid.

Dark, slightly bent with her burden against the sky, she was like a woodcut of the Good Shepherd. Her silhouette, dark and far and small, seemed to belong to distant ages. He stood and watched her until she had disappeared in a lower fold of the cliff and then, slowly, he went forward.

He had but a little way to go before the road turned to climb the promontory; but he did not follow it. He paused for a moment, looking up at the cliff or out at the river, and then walked out onto the causeway.

From where he stood he could not see the bridge that spanned the inner stream, but by now Marthe Ludérac must have crossed it and he descended to the meadow. If she were coming towards the island, he would meet her; if she was picketing her goat on the lower ground, he would join her. This was what Jill had asked him to do. He had demurred; but it was her wish.

As he rounded the promontory he saw her at some little distance before him, and, keeping close to the inner stream, he followed her. The stream, under the vast, looming curve of the cliff, was dark and still. He glanced down at it as he went and saw a sharp edge of blue reflected, deep down, and the far, high beak of the promontory cutting into it; and for a moment it made him dizzy and a little sick to see the inverted height. — Now she had put down the kid and it trotted nimbly yet unsteadily beside its bleating mother. The mother's cry came loudly, shaken by the wind and strangely echoing back from the rocky heights; a cry like the day, Graham felt — full of anxiety, anticipation, and brooding love.

Marthe Ludérac was approaching a little cabin at the furthest end of the meadow. Set small and low on its narrow strip of sunlit meadow between the poplar groves and the gigantic, looming cliff, it made him think of a cabin seen in a dream; the whole picture there before him, of which, with hallucinated vividness, he was suddenly aware, was like a dream, and its very colour seemed part of the fabric of his brain;

the tawny sands, the sepia thickets, the blue and silver of the sky and poplars; and in the centre of its stupendous setting, the lonely cabin held the eye as if by some calm, secret significance. It seemed to him the loneliest thing he had ever looked upon; and the most familiar.

Mademoiselle Ludérac had gone round it, still leading the goat, and when she reappeared she was carrying a mallet and stake. She stood there in the sunlight, her skirts buffeted by the wind, and, as the kid tottered against her, she stooped and kissed the little animal on the forehead. A kid, thought Graham, was certainly one of the most endearing creatures in nature.

He had come slowly forward into the middle of the meadow now, leaving his shelter. There was a sound of water in the air; the deep roar of the great river, and the breathless rush of the outer stream that ran between the meadow and the island. He could not see this stream from where he walked, but he could hear its ardent voice, and high on a poplar a thrush broke into song. Hurried, loud, challenging rather than jubilant, the sudden notes startled him and seemed to knock at his heart.

He was close beside Mademoiselle Ludérac and still she had not seen him. She was finding difficulty with her mallet. She knelt on one knee, the rope twined round her arm, and twice, as she attempted to strike the stake, the goat moved away and the mallet drove into the ground.

'Let me help you,' said Graham.

She started violently, sprang upright, and stood gazing at him in an astonishment too great for alarm.

'Let me help you,' he repeated, and he put out his hand to take the mallet as he spoke. It touched hers. With another start, as violent as the first, she drew back and the mallet fell, with a sufficiently heavy blow, on Graham's foot.

'That is a little too severe, you know,' he remarked, picking up the implement and glancing at her where she stood above him.

At his words her strange blush, pale, yet as violent in its suddenness as her start had been, flooded her face. For a moment she could hardly speak. Then she uttered: 'I am sorry. I did not mean to be so clumsy.'

'Perhaps that makes it all the more cutting,' said Graham, smiling slightly; but with no merriment. He was aware of a feeling in himself that was like cruelty, and of the dry dispassionateness that had sustained him last evening through Jill's story; and all the time he felt, rather than heard, the thrush's hard notes knocking at his heart.

He stooped and drove in the stake. 'So. Is that as you wish it? May I put your mallet in the shed for you while you tie your animal? — Thank you.' The bitter smile, the bitter voice, left her speechless.

He found, as he went round the cabin, that his foot was, indeed, unpleasantly bruised, but he held himself from limping and put the mallet in its place. When he returned, the goat was safely tethered and

the kid had laid itself down in a sunny nook among the bushes. Its little face looked up inquiringly at him as he passed it, innocently arch, with great limpid eyes and two soft buds on its forehead where the horns would be.

Graham and Mademoiselle Ludérac turned and walked side by side down the meadow. Both were silent; perfectly silent. Graham had clasped his hands on his stick behind his back and looked before him with an air of unconcern. Mademoiselle Ludérac, her arms tightly folded in her black shawl, turned her head away and seemed to watch the river. Above them towered the vast form of the promontory. Behind them the thrush sang loudly on, and the wind in the island poplars swept the branches against the sky to slanting lines of blue and silver.

As they neared the bridge, Graham glanced down at the stream and saw again the sharp blue edge of sky, the promontory beak. His dizzy panic gripped him for an uncanny moment and it seemed to him, while he looked, that they were entrapped between the two abysses and that escape was impossible. Then his eye fixed itself in astonishment, for deep in the stream, reflected on the far, high blue, a black blot was poised against the sky. From the stream he looked up at the sheer face of the cliff and saw that Madame de Lamouderie was standing at its topmost verge, looking down at them.

Leaning on her stick, there she stood. From their lifted faces, even at her distance, she must have seen

that they saw her, but she made them no signal, nor did she for a moment move. Strangely ominous, strangely intent, did she appear; like a bird of prey hovering above its quarry. Then, hurriedly, as if in retreat, she turned away and it was as if the sky engulfed her.

Graham glanced at his companion. She was very pale. She did not look at him. And from her pallor, from their silence, from the bird-of-prey scrutiny that had enveloped them, a sober certainty came to him at last, like a stone laid on his heart, and made a mockery of his long pretence.

They had come to the bridge and, laying her hand on the rail, Mademoiselle Ludérac paused before crossing. 'Madame de Lamouderie had hoped to see you this afternoon. Madame Graham told her that she might see you.'

'Yes, I was going to her.'

All he could think of now were her eyes into which he was looking. He did not remember his excuse for being with her on the meadow.

'You will not still come?' said Mademoiselle Ludérac after another moment. Her finger-tips were whitened by the hard grip of her hand upon the rail.

'Do you think she will still care to see me?'

He could say nothing, she could say nothing, that did not discover them to each other. He heard the breathlessness under her careful, measured tones as she answered: 'It is because you are late that she was there. She will care very much to see you.'

'Then, since I am late, I will follow you,' said Graham. 'It would take me another half-hour to go round by the road.'

She made no reply and they crossed the bridge and began the steep ascent. She went before him. He could not see her face; he could only see the proud poise of her shoulders, wrapped in the black shawl, the proud, white neck, the proud, dark head. She seemed to glide upward. So familiar was the rugged path to her foot that it found with easy precision every ledge and level, and they went so swiftly that when they reached the promontory road they were forced to pause for breath. But even here they did not turn to look at the great view spread below them. As if with the shared impulse of escape, they stood side by side, breathing deeply and looking up at the further ascent that wound its way among deep fissures in the rock; and suddenly, as they stood there, Graham heard, far away, the note of a chiff-chaff, and remembered Jill.

'Jill is not well,' he said. He put out his hand and pushed it against the granite wall, still looking up. 'She asked me to find you on the island and tell you that she could not come.'

Mademoiselle Ludérac stood silent for a moment. He had found the words too late to do anything for himself, but to her they might still be helpful. They were helpful. She thought them over and her voice told him that they gave her refuge. 'It is not serious, I hope?'

'No; not serious. It's influenza. The doctor is seeing her. She must take care of herself for a week or two.'

'Would it please her if I should go to see her?'

'I think not; she would be afraid of infection for you.'

'I do not fear it.'

'I imagine that complete rest is the best thing for her.'

She stood for another moment, as if irresolute, and then went forward swiftly. The path now was so steep that they had to lay a hand here and there upon the tangled creepers that draped its walls. Once her foot slipped and she caught herself from falling. Graham stood still, making no attempt to aid her.

They reached the rocky eminence where Madame de Lamouderie had stood. It was not so precipitous as it looked from below. The vineyards sloped up from it and among them stood the dilapidated cottage.

Mademoiselle Ludérac paused. 'I am going to see a sick woman.'

Graham lifted his hat.

She stood there and her eyes met his. She nerved herself. 'You will tell Madame de Lamouderie why you came to find me?'

'That Jill sent me? Of course.'

He was facing her, his hat in his hand, and, as he said the words and looked into her eyes, he felt a hot flush mount to his forehead and beat in his throat. It

was as sudden, as violent, as revealing, as hers had been. She stood there and observed it, helplessly, for another moment, then, with a murmured farewell, she moved swiftly away among the vineyards.

CHAPTER XX

The Courtesan

WHEN Joseph opened to him Graham felt himself observed with a sidelong glance. 'Madame la comtesse is in the garden,' he said. 'She had given up seeing Monsieur to-day.'

'I'll go to her in the garden, then,' said Graham.

He crossed the hall and went out. The air was full of the songs of birds in the sunny, sheltered spaces. The garden had lost the waiting aspect it had in the autumn. Perhaps, thought Graham, as he saw the black figure at the end of the path, this was the encounter it had been waiting for. Yet this encounter did not seem significant. He felt that he was to deal very easily with the old lady. As he approached her it was with astonishment, incredulity, she watched him.

He raised his hat, smiling: 'We've met before — though you would not acknowledge me.'

The old lady wore her broad black hat. She had risen from the bench set against the garden wall and leaned upon her silver-headed stick as she surveyed him, still with incredulity, and without the trace of a smile. If he were to deal with her easily that was simply because he was so indifferent to her. As an antagonist she was not to be despised. She was calm,

she was even majestic. He would have no coquettish plaints to withstand.

'I did not know that you wished to be recognized,' she said, after a moment. They had stood there in the sunlight, surveying each other.

'Why not, I wonder?' said Graham. 'I'm late, I know. But Jill is ill, poor child. She was to have met your friend on the island and asked me to go and find her there and explain why she couldn't come.' Thus, while the birds piped and whistled about them and the wind blew over the forest, did he cut the ground, so he imagined, from under the old lady's feet.

But she stood, majestically, and continued to survey him and a little vein of perplexity crept into his assurance. Had it been a trifle too bold? Had she detected in his voice a brazen note?

'Ah,' was all she said. And then: 'Shall we go in? You wish to continue your work?'

'Most certainly. If you will continue your kindness.'

Madame de Lamouderie laid her hand on his arm and they walked down the path and entered the house, in silence. At the foot of the stairs she stopped. 'I will be with you at once. I will take off my hat and be with you at once.'

In the drawing-room, where a fire was burning in readiness for his arrival, Graham placed his easel. Gloomily indeed the great eyes surveyed him from the canvas and the veil of perplexity, of uncertainty in him, ran more deeply as he looked at them. His story might avail to shield Mademoiselle Ludérac; but it

would not avail to shield himself. There had been that in his demeanour, as they had walked down the meadow between the swollen streams that must inevitably engage a vulture's attention. Well, after all, what of it? He and Jill were soon leaving Buissac.

Madame de Lamouderie entered with an unremitting calm. She had arranged her hair, unaided, under the mantilla, and her lips were accurately rouged.

'I am grieved indeed to hear that my charming young friend is ill,' she said, going to her chair. 'I thought, yesterday, that she looked feverish.' She drew the mantilla forward over her shoulder and arranged the laces at her wrist.

'I'm afraid she caught this cold several days ago,' said Graham. 'If I had realized it she should have been put to bed at once. The only thing for a cold, isn't it?'

'She came, through sheer kindness, to see me,' said Madame de Lamouderie. 'It is a heart of gold she has. And it is too true' — she had taken her pose and Graham began to paint — 'too true that she should not have come out. Already she had been harassed, troubled. You heard, perhaps, that my unfortunate Marthe had been ill-advised enough to tell her the story of her mother's disgrace.'

'Yes. So I heard. I do not think Jill felt it ill-advised.'

'I differ from her, then,' said Madame de Lamouderie with composure. 'Ill-advised, unsuitable, I consider such confessions to be, and confessions unasked

for: but reticence is a quality one does not often find among the lower orders. Your wife's interest had touched poor Marthe too much. She wished to make sure of it. Let that be her excuse.'

Graham made no reply. He painted in silence and Madame de Lamouderie, now, kept silence too.

When he paused the light had begun to wane. But he had done much. The old head looked out at him from the canvas with an astonishing vitality. He had thought so one-sidedly of his work that he was surprised to see how it had responded to the little he had to give.

'How do you like it?' he asked, turning the canvas to the old lady. She studied it, but, as he saw, with an attention as divided as his own had been. Even her vanity was in abeyance to-day. 'It is remarkable. It is magnificent. I am satisfied to have served your genius so well, Monsieur. — Is the sitting over for to-day? The light is altered, is it not? There is something of which I wish to speak to you.'

'Yes. I can stay a little.' Graham was taken aback by the deliberate request. But if there was anything to face, it would, he felt, be better to have it over.

'Put away your things, then,' said Madame de Lamouderie, and when he had done this, perhaps a trifle sulkily, for her attitude put him singularly at a disadvantage, she pointed to the low chair opposite her own on the other side of the hearth. 'Will you sit there?'

Graham sat himself down and folded his arms.

'It is about Marthe and your wife that I wish to speak to you,' said Madame de Lamouderie, looking, not at him, but, contemplatively, into the fire. 'You will not be surprised at my decision, for what I have to say will show you that if your wife is very much your affair, Marthe is very much mine. It is, in a sense, under my protection that she has lived, for some years, now — in so far as I can lend it to her.'

And what had Jill to do with it? So unexpected was her approach to her theme that Graham knew himself still more at a disadvantage; but, his chin on one hand, his elbow in the other, he sat as if much at ease and observed his hostess.

'You knew,' said Madame de Lamouderie, 'that I had already told your wife something of Marthe's history.'

'Yes,' said Graham, 'I knew about that.'

'It was all that I felt it wise to tell,' said Madame de Lamouderie, 'for I was alarmed lest in speaking of one thing, I should, inadvertently, reveal another.'

'Well, that alarm was unnecessary, wasn't it, since Mademoiselle Ludérac has now told all her history to Jill?'

'No,' said Madame de Lamouderie, slowly shaking her head, while her great eyes rested on the flames, 'no; she has not told all. I do not allude to her unhappy mother's drama. It is of Marthe's own story that I am now speaking and it is not one that she would ever tell your wife.'

A little pause fell in the darkening room and Gra-

ham felt himself suddenly retreat, as if from a dimly seen tentacle stretched forth towards him. 'In what way does Mademoiselle Ludérac's story concern me?' he coldly questioned.

'It concerns you in that it concerns your Jill,' said Madame de Lamouderie and her eyes lifted themselves for a moment and rested upon him. 'Some intimacies it is not suitable that she should be exposed to. She is singularly young; singularly confiding and inexperienced. Marthe would never tell her; nor could I; but to you I feel that I owe a complete avowal, since it is through me that your wife met my *protégée*. — You will do me the justice to remember that it was never as other than a performer for our entertainment that I introduced her.'

Graham now leaned back and locked his hands behind his head and looked heavily across at the old lady, and after a pause she took up her theme with the deliberate gravity that had, throughout, marked her manner.

'You know now all that need be known of my poor Marthe's lamentable girlhood. Her youth, the flower of her age, was spent in caring for a demented mother. She had no guidance; no protection; no instruction. Her family were free-thinkers; atheists; — religion meant nothing in their lives. They had none of the standards, none of the prejudices, even, of the upper classes. When Marthe's mother died, she went to Bordeaux to seek for work. She was not known there. It would have been impossible for her to re-

turn to Angoulême. And this was before I knew her. I could recommend her to none of those who might have warned and guarded her. She was alone in a strange city. She was poor and embittered. She had no religious faith. Can you blame her, Monsieur, can you feel surprised (she has a potent attraction — as you have recognized) — when I tell you that she yielded to the solicitations of her youth and of her indigence? It was in the last years of the war. Bordeaux was full of weary, desperate soldiers. She took lovers among them; many lovers. Passion had its way with her. Under that chill demeanour she has a temperament of fire and she burned her youth away.'

Graham had not stirred. He still sat, his hands locked behind his head, his eyes on his hostess; and first there came a self-protective instinct that told him to make no sign of shock; and then a deep, sick intimation of acquiescence; of relief. This was separation. This was safety. Marthe Ludérac was like himself. Not set apart; not a celestial mystery. He could now turn his back on her. Jill was saved; and he was saved. But he must say something to Madame de Lamouderie, and as he found his voice at last he knew that it betrayed, not relief, but the bitterness of a disillusion deeper than any thought could reach.

'How, with such a means of livelihood at her disposal, did she come to turn to teaching? Or does she teach? Are her winters at Bordeaux passed with lovers?'

The old lady paused. The light was waning. He

could not clearly distinguish her features. They seemed to express a profound sadness; but he was not thinking of the old lady. He was thinking of himself and of what his voice betrayed. She slowly shook her head. 'It is over. I believe that it is over. There is great strength in Marthe. She has made me her promises. She came to know me. I did not shrink from her. I am not easily shocked by life. I have sympathy, Monsieur, for temperaments of fire. With my help she has been able to build up a new life.'

'But since she had embarked on that career,' said Graham, still trying for a light irony, 'it might seem more to her advantage if she were to continue it. — It's a dull life she leads here. The life of a music-teacher in Bordeaux must be dull. She is, as you say, most remarkably attractive; attractive enough to pick and choose. The profession of a courtesan, especially in France, offers very solid advantages.'

At that, immediately, with a repudiating, even a noble coldness, Madame de Lamouderie answered: 'You misinterpret me, Monsieur. Marthe was not a mere courtesan. She was not depraved. She was not mercenary. It was not to the rich only she gave herself; it was to the poor, also; to the poorest little *poilu*, if he could touch her heart. A man and a woman, I know it well, cannot see that question eye to eye; even when one is as old as I am and the other as young as you. To a man, women are divided into the sheep and the goats; the innocent and the guilty. I do not feel it so. Marthe has lived the life that a not ignoble man

may lead. She has loved freely — as her heart led her to love. There are degrees of disintegration and she was far from having reached the lowest. And, strange as it may seem to you, I respect Marthe Ludérac. I respect her courage; her strength of will. I cannot forget the beautiful devotion to her mother, nor what blood it is that runs in her veins, urging her towards destruction.'

Though she spoke so rightly, and with such a ring of just disdain, Graham did not show her any sign of approbation. He remained, apparently, unmoved, and his expression even betrayed an offensive scepticism. And still he was not thinking of the old lady. She was a crow, merely, that croaked from the battlement, and all the omens seemed hatefully to assent to her loathsome ditty. It was something dark as well as something radiant that had drawn him to Marthe Ludérac from the beginning. Something fateful, boding, had hung round her figure from the first moment when he had seen her coming like a ghost, all white and black, round the corner of the house. From the first he had known her attitude towards him to be ambiguous. But his bitterness was for himself. That he should have found meanings so mysterious for a reality so miserable; — his Eurydice, shining and immortal in her grave-clothes, only a pitiful little courtesan. Madame de Lamouderie sat there, her eyes upon him, and in her presence he could not probe the darkness that opened within him. The faint, haughty smile fixed upon his face was the veil he held between them.

But the old lady, impersonal, dispassionate, was today armed with a terrible prescience. Her next words seemed prompted by an unerring instinct. 'I have told you all this because of your Jill. I have felt, watching the events of these last days, that you might wish to withdraw her, tactfully, from an unsuitable intimacy. Marthe herself, I have seen it plainly — and in looking back you will concede it to her — has done her best to withdraw. She has the instinct of what is fitting. But it is not only that. I have my own responsibility towards Marthe. I should feel that I failed in it unless I went further and spoke very frankly to you, as an old woman may to a young man. Marthe lives here under my protection. I have seen that upon you she produces the effect she produces upon other men. And I must ask you to take no advantage of the frailty now fully exposed to you.'

'Advantage?'

Under brows of thunder Graham's eyes darted their dark flames towards her.

The old lady did not quail. 'I have revealed to you — before, I trust, she herself revealed it — that to my *protégée* the seduction of the other sex is as potent as hers for them. May I trust you not to yield to the appeal of such a proximity?'

Graham stared, blackly, for another moment. Then, violently, he started up from his chair.

'Are you suggesting that I might feel drawn to purchasing Mademoiselle Ludérac's favours?'

Madame de Lamouderie, unmoved, looked up at

him, and in her eye he seemed now to detect a malevolent beam.

'You put it clearly, my young man.'

'I don't think you quite realize to whom you are speaking.'

'*Mais, mon cher ami,*' said the old lady, and her twisted smile distorted the lines of her mouth and the lid of one eye dropped until it covered the iris, 'I speak to a man — *tout simplement.*'

'I see. All right. You have made a mistake.'

Graham was turning from her, but her next words, spoken with no urgency, no change of tone, arrested his departure. 'I have made no mistake. You are a man, like another. You cannot pretend with me to be a *sainte nitouche.* You have had your mistresses; and perhaps as many as poor Marthe has had lovers. You cannot face me and tell me that because you have made a happy marriage you are incapable of desiring another woman.'

Graham faced her. 'I am in no humour for confessions. But of one thing you may be assured. Your *protégée* runs no risk from me. I am not a man to be tempted by a lady of such easy virtue.'

The old lady bowed her head. 'That is well. I thank you.'

And why should Madame de Lamouderie be treated as if she were guilty? He was aware of the question as he left her and the beam of recognized malevolence seemed to answer him. She had been glad to shatter his illusions, and whatever mitigations justice might

find for her behaviour, all that he knew now was that he wanted to get away from her: be rid of her.

And she understood it well enough. He must concede her that. She made no effort to delay him. Had he demanded some final verification from her, none more convincing than her silence now could have been offered. She adored him: but jealousy had not been her motive; or how could she have endured to see him go like this?

CHAPTER XXI

The Lost Eurydice

VEIL after veil, deepening as it descended towards the valley, the dusk was dropping between the forest arches. All the great wind had fallen and the twilight air was calm. As Graham walked down the winding road, a strange effect followed upon his anger and bewilderment. It was as if the evening, with death-like, gentle hands, soothed them away, and his soul was dispossessed of all the magic that had so tormented and intoxicated him. He had the feeling of awakening from a dream. There was hardly a root of living fact in his memory that might resist the chill, soft effacement. It had all been a dream; all except those moments on the island; so near that when he thought of them it was only as a knocking at his heart that they returned; a thrush's notes; a white hand from which the mallet dropped.

Why had he been so angry? The old lady had been right. She had seen the truth to which he had been blinding himself all these days and she had warned him. If she had been glad to warn him, if there had been vindictiveness in the impulse, that did not condemn her. He had given her too much to bear. If she were jealous, malevolent, untruthful, in this she had been right — to him; to Jill; and to her *protégée*.

Mademoiselle Ludérac's figure passed through his

mind, shrouded, featureless, sunken to the wraith-like anonymity of the *protégée*. He would remember the word. It had a talismanic quality. A thing to be protected; a thing needing protection. That was the old lady's rightness. She had seen that he needed a talisman and she had given him one. All the agitation, the fear, the loud knocking at his heart were gone, and he could see the *protégée* as she was, a nameless, lamentable, fate-ridden creature.

His thought traversed, but from far above, like a bird above a lurid landscape, the wretched story that Madame de Lamouderie had unfolded. His gaze rested on no aspect of it, though from one darkly smouldering spot the faded heat seemed to reach up to him in his altitude and scorch, ever so slightly, his indifference. — Her heart had been touched even by 'the poorest little *poilu*.' — And remembering that, he remembered the start away from his inadvertent touch, that afternoon, of all her conscious flesh. She feared him, with reason; and she feared herself, with greater reason. From the beginning she had feared, as he had.

And now he hastened towards Jill; Jill who need never endure such complicities of comprehension. He was, at last, able to think of Jill as he had not thought of her for many days. He remembered yesterday and his weakness and wondered if it had really troubled her. She must have seen it as a passing whim or mood — things with which imperturbable Jill was familiar in him. No; Jill had not been touched. No shadow of his still-born infidelity rested upon her. Happy, inno-

cent Jill. Never had he loved her as he loved her now, urged towards her by self-scorn; and by that sense of a dark reek on the air, the taint in his nostrils for which Jill's limpidity, as of mountain freshness, would be the antidote. Dear normal Jill, of earth and air and water. Let him never again wander after the infernal brightness of strange goddesses. Let dear earth suffice him.

Jill was asleep when he went in. She lay on her pillow, her cheek turned to her hand, and looked, with her tossed locks and parted lips, like a very young child. He bent over her, tenderly smiling, while tears rose to his eyes.

When she awoke, she asked him no question about his afternoon. That would have been strange, were it not that she was really ill, and the fever ran high that night. But she smiled dimly and gratefully upon him while he nursed her, and he felt that if any shadow had lurked he would have seen it.

He hardly left her for three days. When he went out, it was to walk in the opposite direction from the Manoir, up towards the river gorges, and deep relief was in him for the blessed interlude. It was only as the fever left her, as the days passed on, that he began to wonder at her silence; and to ask himself if she wondered at his. Jill did not even ask him why he was not going on with Madame de Lamouderie's portrait.

She could sit up now in bed, and knit and write letters, and he read aloud to her. It might have been a very happy time had it not been for the sense of tension, even of breathlessness, that affected him. It was

at night, lying in the little room beside hers, that he seemed to recover, from his impressions of the day, a memory of tension in Jill, too, that only her smiling calm kept from being apparent when they were together. And, thinking of it at night, it became very strange to him to remember that she had never asked him one question about the Manoir and its inmates. It was as if her illness had washed from her mind the memory of what had too much discomposed it. Marthe Ludérac's story had too much discomposed her. That was what it came to. So Graham, lying awake at night, would tell himself.

Then, one evening, after tea, Amélie came up and said that Mademoiselle Ludérac was below and asked if she might see Madame.

It was hateful to Graham; it made him hate himself, to find that helplessly, involuntarily, he had started to his feet. He could not see her. That was the first thought that had come to him; before any thought of Jill. He could not see her. She would be hateful to see. Disgust and terror seemed evenly mingled in his impulse of flight. But Jill was looking over at him, strangely looking, and she said: 'Don't go. Stay. I want you to see her, too.'

The quiet and urgency of her voice reminded him of the afternoon when she had asked him to see Marthe Ludérac on the island, and he now wondered whether that had been to test his strength, and her own; to test the reality left to them. He stood still and leaned back against the mantelpiece. He stood in shadow so, for

the electric lamp by the bedside cast but a dim penumbra beyond the lighted circle where Jill sat in her pink silk jacket.

Mademoiselle Ludérac just glanced at him as she came in, bowed her head, and went swiftly to Jill and took her hand and stood beside her, half turned from him. She wore a long black cloak and a small black hat, and all that he saw of her face was the pale line of her cheek. But he saw her white hand, holding Jill's. He watched it while she and Jill spoke together.

'You are better?'

How her voice startled him. It was as if he had forgotten it.

'Ever so much better. — How good of you to come.'

'I should have come before, had you needed me. — It is for Madame de Lamouderie that I have come.'

'She's sent you? — It was better for you not to come, wasn't it? — It's such a tiresome thing to catch, dear Marthe.'

'No; she has not sent me. I have come quite of my own initiative. — No, it is not to stay. — I must go back to her' — Jill had indicated a chair — 'or she will miss me and she must not know that I have been with you. — It is only this. Now that you are better, could Monsieur Graham' — Mademoiselle Ludérac did not look towards him as she thus named him, but it was with perfect calm that she spoke — 'come and see her, do you think? She is very much troubled, though she tries to hide it. I have told her that it is

your illness that keeps him here, but she is very much troubled. It would touch your heart to see her. She has grown so thin and does not eat. Could he come, if only for a little while?' Mademoiselle Ludérac reiterated, and it did not seem strange to either of them that she spoke to Jill and not to Graham.

'But of course he will,' said Jill in her confident tone of reassurance. 'Poor old dear! Of course you will, Dick, won't you? — I'm quite all right now. You could go to-night, for a little while. It's as bright as day with the moon, isn't it? It will be so lovely in the forest. — You will go, Dick?'

'Yes. Certainly I'll go,' Graham answered.

He was looking at Mademoiselle Ludérac, who looked at Jill, and he found that he could look at her fixedly. For he saw now that, though there was to be a next chapter, it would be empty of her; even though it was not to be empty of Madame de Lamouderie. He would never find Mademoiselle Ludérac at the Manoir and he and Jill, indeed, could not have left Buissac without seeing their old friend.

'Oh — I thank you so much, so very much,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac, continuing to look at Jill. 'It has made me unhappy to see her so shaken. It is a real devotion that she feels, and to be cut away from it, so suddenly, is perilous for her. — It is not kind to leave her so, when she cares so much — and without a word.'

And suddenly, listening to her, Graham was aware of a passionate resentment in Mademoiselle Ludérac's voice, and that she spoke through tears. It was natural

that she should feel this solicitude. It was creditable to her. So Graham told himself, in dry, dispassionate phrases, while his eyes rested on Mademoiselle Ludérac's hand holding Jill's in the circle of light, and from far away he seemed to hear the hurried notes of a thrush and a rushing wind among the poplar tops. Strange, uncontrolled creature, indeed. She was angry with him for his neglect of her benefactress. And Jill was murmuring: 'Oh, dear, dear Marthe! I'm so sorry. — We're both so sorry. — He didn't mean to be unkind.'

'No, no; — he did not mean it. — He will tell her that he did not mean it. — A thousand thanks,' Mademoiselle Ludérac murmured, withdrawing her hand as if alarmed by her own betrayal of emotion. 'I will say nothing to her. She may believe, may she not, that it is quite spontaneously that Monsieur Graham comes? He will not mention me? —'

'No, of course he won't mention you. She shan't be troubled in any way.' Jill, as she spoke, put out her hand to her friend. 'But when shall I see you again, Marthe?'

Arrested in her departure, Mademoiselle Ludérac stood and looked down into Jill's sad eyes; their jocund carving made them all the sadder. 'When you are better. When you are strong again,' she said.

'But I am better. I shall get up to-morrow. It's so lovely now. We must hear our birds, Marthe.'

'Yes. Soon. Some day soon. We must hear them,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac, and to Graham's ear it

was soothingly that she spoke, as a parent speaks to a child who must not know that it is leaving for a long, long journey. And would she kiss Jill? Yes. Jill drew her down and she bent still further and pressed her lips on Jill's forehead, but it was Jill who put her arms around her neck and kissed her on the lips, murmuring, 'Dear, darling Marthe!'

So she was gone, swiftly, silently, as she had come.

Graham stood still before the fire. He had a sense of overwhelming danger.

'You don't mind my promising for you, Dick?' Jill lay back on her pillows and spoke softly. She was tired. She wished to hide from him how tired; but he saw. 'You had to go, hadn't you? — Poor old creature. You ought to have gone long before. You really could have.'

'Yes; — oh, yes, I could have,' said Graham. He hardly heard what he was saying. His mind was fixed in a strange impulse. The sense of overwhelming danger was imminent and if he yielded to the impulse it would put an end — to everything. 'You see, the last time I saw her — she made me rather sick,' he said, and he turned from Jill and laid his hands on the mantelpiece and looked down at the flames.

'Yes — I know,' Jill strangely murmured. 'I mean — she made me rather sick, too, the last time *I* saw her.'

'I didn't tell you, because you were ill and I was afraid it would upset you. But I may as well now,' said Graham, his eyes on the fire and his mind fixed in

its impulse. 'She told me all Mademoiselle Ludérac's story. Partly jealousy, no doubt. But, partly, trying to be square, to us both. She felt I ought to know, because of your friendship with her *protégée*. She was really rather fine. And she is evidently devoted, heart and soul, to Mademoiselle Ludérac.'

Jill lay, very still, behind him.

'It's a wretched story,' said Graham, 'and it will make you feel sick, I'm afraid. But I think you ought to know. I believe she herself would like you to know. She's tried her best to keep you at arm's length, hasn't she? — Mademoiselle Ludérac has been a courtesan, Jill.'

There was no sound behind him for a moment. And then Jill's voice came.

'Madame de Lamouderie said Marthe had been a courtesan?'

'No; she didn't say it. I did. She said that she'd taken lovers. That when she went to Bordeaux, after her mother's death, she took lovers — indiscriminately; except for the fact that she wasn't merely mercenary. She was alone, and poor, and had no prejudices; — so Madame de Lamouderie put it. And if she felt drawn to a little *poilu*, she'd give herself to him as soon as to a rich man.' An extraordinary bitterness had come to Graham's voice.

'And you believed her?' came Jill's voice, after another moment.

'Yes,' said Graham. 'I believed her. Why shouldn't I believe her?'

'Because she's mad with love of you,' said Jill.

'I know that. She was glad to tell me, of course. But it wasn't jealousy. No; you'd have believed her if you had heard her. She was very angry with me for calling her penitent a courtesan. For she is reformed, it seems.'

'You believe it, because you've been like that yourself, Dick. You've been bad in that way and that's why you are able to believe it of Marthe.'

That was why, perhaps — Graham saw it in a sudden uncanny flash of insight, helped by Jill — he had heard that bitterness come into his own voice just now. The unchaste man can feel no spiritual tolerance for the unchaste woman.

'If it's true, in any way true,' Jill went on, weighing her words, 'it isn't in any way that you or Madame de Lamouderie could understand.'

'Draw it mild, Jill,' Graham muttered. 'I'm not such a satyr as all that.'

'No; you're not a satyr. But you believe that Marthe has been mauled about by horrible Frenchmen! —' Jill's voice broke at last; sobs came into it. He turned, slowly, to look at her. She was lying back on her pillow with burning cheeks, her eyes closed. And though the sobs had come she mastered them. Her chest heaved and was quiet again. 'Poor Dick,' she said.

It was so strangely that she said it that his heart stood still. She said it as if she understood all.

'I've made you ill. I've been a fool,' he muttered, not approaching her.

'No. I'm not ill. I'm better. I'm glad you told me. I shall get it straight,' Jill muttered.

'Don't try to have it out with the old woman, Jill,' said Graham, after a moment. He felt as if he were picking his footsteps, cautiously, past a fiery furnace that might open and devour him. He kept his eyes on Jill. But she did not open hers. It was, again, as if she understood. 'Let her alone. Let both of them alone. By God,' he muttered, turning to the fire again, 'I wish we'd never seen the place!'

'I don't. Because if we had never seen the place we'd never have seen Marthe.' Jill's voice was clear and unfaltering as she made this statement. 'I'm not afraid of Madame de Lamouderie. And you needn't be, either, Dick.'

'You still want me to go up and see her, then?' with what a feeble voice he spoke, standing there and looking down into the fire. Did not Jill despise him? He despised himself. 'You will be able to get up to-morrow. Let's go to-morrow, then, Jill. Let's clear out.'

But Jill was unfaltering. 'No. I will make it straight first,' she said. 'And of course you will go up to her. Because Marthe wants you to. Because Marthe's unhappy about her. — Now let me go to sleep for a little while.'

CHAPTER XXII

Cécile Léonore

THE drawing-room at the Manoir had not been put in readiness for his visit. That would have been to give Madame de Lamouderie a suspicion of the errand on her behalf. There were thin white tulips on the mantelpiece, but they glimmered, half effaced, in the shade of the oil lamp that stood beneath them; and there, in the circle of dreary light, sat the old lady, huddled together, like a disabled bat, under the folds of a long black shawl. Unaware, she sat, sunken in a drowsy, bitter torpor, and seeing her Graham remembered that he had once smelt a bat. The memory of the smell came back to him; bitter, sour, drowsy.

But the eyes that Madame de Lamouderie raised were not like a bat's eyes. He had walked up through the forest in bright, silver moonlight, and they made him think of the night; of melancholy, silver blackness.

The days of her loneliness had hollowed her face and strewn it with ashes; but her eyes were beautiful; and as he looked into them she was at once loathsome and attractive to his mind. She had struck at her own heart as deeply as at his.

'*C'est vraiment vous? — Je pensais ne plus vous revoir,*' was what she said.

Would not even Jill have seen that this was not a mere malignant liar, he wondered, as he stood there, silent, before her. Jill's face, with the closed eyes and burning cheeks, drifted across his mind. She had shut out the hateful vision he put before her; the vision of the old lady telling what she had told; the vision of himself, believing. But Jill had not said it was not true. She had only said that if it were true it was in a way that he and Madame de Lamouderie could not understand. That it was true, true in any way, was enough to keep him safe. So his mind ran, while he stood and looked deeply down into the black and silver eyes.

'Yes. It's I. Jill has been very ill, you know. — Why shouldn't you see me again?' he said.

She made no reply to that, and though he paused, waiting for what she might find to say, nothing came. She only continued to fix her great eyes upon him with an infinite sadness.

'And how are you?' he asked; coldly, but with formal interest.

Even to this the old lady did not, for a moment, reply. Then, slowly shaking her head, she answered: 'As you see me.'

Graham had taken the chair opposite her on the hearth, and stretching up his arms he locked his hands behind his head. So he had sat the last time he had seen her; when she had told him and he had believed.

He was thinking of Marthe Ludérac now, his eyes

fixed on the fire. He seemed to see her walking in the forest, her figure flitting from black to silver through the tree-trunks. It was a beautiful spring night. It would pour balm into her heart; and with a rush, as of wings, the harp notes of the Orpheus music went through his own.

'You look sad,' he heard himself saying; how long after the old lady's words he did not know.

'So do you,' she said quietly.

'Which is the saddest, I wonder,' Graham seemed to muse. 'Youth or age? Remembrance, or presage, which is worst?'

'But one does not escape presage when one is old. One can still fear, even when one is old,' said Madame de Lamouderie with her quiet.

'Can one really? But there can't be much left to be afraid of; if one has no superstitions.'

'There is still life to be afraid of.'

'With so little of it left?'

'But we do not feel life as duration. You well know that. A tragedy may be concentrated in a bare half-hour, as well at the end of life as at the beginning. One minute, if it is sufficiently terrible, may blot out half a century. What was the suffering on the cross? Three hours. Yet it has shadowed two millenniums.'

Graham lifted his eyes at that and looked across at Madame de Lamouderie. He looked long. His look plunged into the night of her eyes, plunged and sank and brooded there. What was it between him and this old woman? He distrusted her; he disliked her; it

might well be that he loathed her; yet in that night they were near. And her soul rose up and seemed to swim from great depths towards him; a drowned, dead soul, resuscitated by his gaze. It clung to him. He seemed to feel it fasten itself upon him and hide in him; like a bat; a bat creeping into its refuge and huddling there. Or was it not, rather, like a silver star rising up from the depths towards the companion star of his soul, bent to look down into the darkness? Bat, or star? Which?

'I wish I understood you,' he said, half hypnotized by her gaze and by the tension of his thought.

'You do,' said Madame de Lamouderie.

'No.' He shook his head. 'No; I don't. Because you don't understand yourself.'

'Which of us does?'

'Some of us have things out with ourselves. Some of us never do. I don't feel that you do. I feel, now' — he was thinking, thinking, his eyes on hers — 'that you are having them out for me; not for yourself.'

'That is because I love you,' said Madame de Lamouderie.

'Yes. I know,' Graham replied. 'But that isn't enough. You must find more substance than that.'

Something dropped away from her gaze then; as if the resuscitated soul drowsed back again, sank down, reëntered its oblivion. Perhaps the words she had uttered, and that he had so quietly accepted, woke her too fully to the temporal order of existence. He watched the star sink, sink, out of sight while, almost

with the shadow of an ashen smile, she said, 'It is all the substance I ask for.'

'You are my Undine, eh? I make or unmake you? Well; have it so, then. I can't make anything enduring out of someone I don't understand, you know.'

'Ah, but I do not wish to endure. When you pass from my life — as you soon must do — I know it well — my wish would be that my life, too, should pass, like the shadow when the sun has sunk.'

'I hope that's not true. I don't know when you speak the truth,' Graham muttered, for her voice moved him strangely. 'Let us go back to our theme. Remembrance and presage. Aren't there sweet things in remembrance, then?'

The old lady accepted the change of key. She looked away from him. She seemed to ponder, and, again with the ashen smile, she said, 'Yes; there are sweet things. I sometimes think for hours of my childhood. When one is old I imagine that one's childhood is always sweet to one. One lifts oneself up, up, on the tips of one's toes — and there, far away, over all the mists and morasses, it is just visible; so bright; so small; so long. Looking back it seems as long as all the rest that comes between.'

'Tell me about your childhood,' he said. And sitting there, wrapped in her long black shawl, obedient, acquiescent, blissful, weaving with skill and industry any spell that might keep him near her, she told him.

The small, bright kingdom with its long, long days rose up softly before him. The cathedral of a great

beech forest in Normandy, with pale pillars through which, in March, one saw the pale blue sea. It was there she took him first. Daffodils were scattered thickly along its aisles; the woodmen ranged their faggots; children's clear voices rang, and little Belot, the white-and-gold spaniel, ran with them, barking; for the forest was part of their home and half a mile away, at the top of its *tapis vert*, the high Louis Quatorze *château*, pale pink, pale grey, with *pigeonniers* set at each angle of its garden, watched over them. In the village, down in the valley, the peasants still wore *coifs*, crimped, winged, folded. Riding her dappled horse in a flowing skirt and plume, Maman passed along the golden edges of the plain. Old Blaise the farmer took them through the *basse-cour* to see the new litter of little pigs; so young that their tiny ears seemed braided back and tied behind, like the hair of demure little convent girls, though their eyes were already sharp and wise as they glanced up sideways, sucking at their happy mother. The farmer's daughter gave them fresh bread, and cream out of a great brown earthern pot; bread, pearl-coloured, glutinous, delicious, with a thick brown crust like the edge of thatch on one of the cottages. Irises grew along the thatch-ridges, and their roots, boiled with the linen, sent the breath of wafted violets through your dreams at night.

In the school-room sat the young literature master, stately, sad, and ridiculous, with a collar like Monsieur de Lamartine's. He would come to the salon after

dinner and read poetry aloud to Maman and Grand'-mère and the aunts and cousins, while they embroidered. It was one of the great-aunts, always in black satin with lace falling from a black cap on her portly shoulders, who found a young wife for him, and they had been married from the *château*. Their son had made a great name for himself; and their daughter had been called after her — who was the great-aunt's favourite — Cécile Léonore. In the salon Maman had a golden cage full of tiny tropical birds, piping, chirruping, trilling, like mice, like tinkling, thread-like brooks. Tempted beyond her strength one day, small Cécile put a hand into the fluttering rainbow and seized a *cordon-bleu*. Maman found her holding it. There was a penitence that day of bread and water. But the penitence was nothing to the horror that had shot through her little chest as she had stood looking at the bright, warm, still creature lying dead on her palm.

In the garden on a soft June morning, Papa led her by the hand; so tall, so elegant; with *favoris*, and close-fitting trousers strapped under his shining shoes, and high stock collar. He named all the roses to her and picked a small pink bud and gave it to her and kissed her and said, 'It is like my little Cécile.'

And as the old lady talked, by the dying fire, the radiance of those vanished days rested on her. Her eyes were soft; her lips sweet. She was happy, happy and self-forgetting, Graham saw, and almost forgetful of him, though it was for him she wove her spell; so that, for the first time, beauty came to him from her. He

was with her in her childhood; he was with the little Cécile Léonore, as he listened.

The clock in the hall, the brooding, mournful clock, struck ten. It was time to go. 'Yes. I'm afraid it's late. I must go back to Jill,' he said. He rose and stood above her.

'Shall I see you again?' she asked. It might have been indeed that she had reached the end of things and saw her sun sink.

'Yes. Yes,' he promised gravely. He wished he could keep her happy; without presage; with remembrance; with little Cécile in the beech forest. 'There's the portrait. We have that still to finish.'

She gazed up at him. 'We are to finish it?'

'We must finish it.' He saw that they must. For the first time, to-night, he saw that he owed her something.

'Good-night, then,' she said. She asked no question of when his time would be. And she said no word — ah! never a word, of Marthe Ludérac.

'Good-night.'

She rose to her feet and took her stick and prepared to go with him to the door.

'Shall I ring for Joseph?' he asked.

'No; Joseph is in Buissac, with his niece's family. And I will not wait for his return. I am tired. Would you lend me your arm to my room? The stairs at night are difficult for me.'

He gave her his arm and led her out. A night-light burned dimly in a saucer at the turning of the stair.

He led her up and she sighed in going, stretching out her hand for the rail. She had aged terribly, he felt it anew, in these last eight days, and on his hard heart there fell a blow of pity, of self-reproach.

At the top of the stair he pushed aside a swinging baize door that gave on a dark passage; airless, thick with the smell of beeswax.

'Now to the right. There is a little flight of stairs,' said Madame de Lamouderie, and as they turned a corner the moonlight flooded in from a small high window and showed him the way. The passage beyond the three stairs, leading down, turned to darkness again, but an open lighted door was before them. The old lady's room waited in readiness for her. When he led her to the threshold he saw that two candles were burning on the toilet-table, a table all looped with muslin over pink and tied with wide pink ribbons. What a picture that would make, the old black figure before the pink, bedizened toilet-table.

And there they paused on the threshold, and Madame de Lamouderie was looking up at him.

'If you would kiss me, once.'

He did not give himself time to think. Had he thought, he might have been guilty of a graceless retreat or a lame apology. Immediately he said, 'But I am honoured,' and though, as he bent to her, he had time for a horrid vision of gripping old hands seizing him, withered old lips searching for his lips, he found, as he kissed her forehead, and then her cheek, holding her by the hand, that he had wronged her indeed. She stood mute; still; as if under an accolade.

CHAPTER XXIII

In Marthe Ludérac's Room

NOW Madame de Lamouderie's door was closed and he was in the dark still house; alone. He felt his way along the passage to the moonlit window and then stood perplexed. Was it to the right or left one turned? With hands outstretched, feeling his way, he went forward cautiously, waiting to meet the three ascending steps; but he did not find them and the passage seemed longer than he remembered. A door gave gently to his hand. — Yes; there had been a door. — He pushed it open and saw before him, not the staircase, but a small, white room lighted by one candle. On a bed against the wall a cat lay sleeping. There was a shelf of books; a vase of flowers; a holy-water shell with a sprig of box above it. Opening on a square of mystic blue was a high window, and standing looking out, her arms leaned on the sill, was Marthe Ludérac. She wore a night-dress of thick linen, like a peasant's, and her unbraided hair fell to her waist. Her feet were bare. She did not hear him. So intent was her gaze into the moonlit night that she was unaware of the draught blowing past her into the room. Not until the candle flared and flickered did she lift her arms and turn to look at it; and then she saw him standing in the doorway.

Graham did not move or speak and she, too, stood

silent, gazing at him. She was wonderful in her straight hair outlined in light on the blue rectangle of the window. Her face against its background of dark gold was of a pale blue tint and all her form gold and azure. She was like a saint in an illuminated missal. And she was like a young peasant, too, with the unbound hair and the coarse white linen night-dress that came up to her neck and down to her wrists and ankles. It was at last as if he could see her; as if she were a picture set there for him to look at; only even now it was not her face he saw; it was the picture. Then his eyes were drawn to hers. At last he dared to gaze into her eyes. Was it the saint's cold, transfixing repudiation he met there? Or was it the mute, animal acquiescence of the peasant? He could not read the meaning of Marthe Ludérac's gaze; but she stood there, silent, motionless.

Graham shut the door softly behind him and came towards her. The stealthiness of his query was in his tread, and as he thus shut them in, as he thus advanced, she made no sound, no gesture. Then he stretched out his hands to take her and she sprang back from him.

At that every doubt, every thought in Graham merged into the impulse of pursuit. A dark torrent of blood seemed to sweep before his eyes and to obliterate her azure face; but, as he seized her, as it sank before him, he received the meaning of her gaze; and it was not this.

Ah — but this was now his meaning. This was now the meaning of his pounding pulses. She could retreat

no further; she had fallen back against the window-sill, and the blue and gold saint, the peasant in her coarse night-dress, was helpless under his kisses. Ravenously he kissed her. Her body was cold and strong under his arms. The cold moonlit air blew in upon them from the window.

Then he heard her saying, as with all her force she resisted him, '*Sortez:* — *sortez:* — *sortez* —' in a suffocated voice.

Terror and fury were in the voice, though it spoke with no divided will, though the hands that thrust him from her were as strong, as untremulous as a peasant's.

He yielded to them, but fell at her feet and clasped her round the knees. 'Tell me that you forgive me.'

Her hands — against his head, against his shoulder — thrust him from her. They felt like iron. This was no courtesan. This was his Eurydice.

'Only say that you forgive me. I am mad with love of you.'

'*Sortez! Sortez!*' she repeated.

But Graham, hiding his face against her side, clasping her round like a drowning man, muttered savagely: 'You must forgive me. You must say it. You love me and you must say it. I will do all that you tell me. I will even go away — for ever. But I will not leave you now unless I am forgiven.'

'I forgive you. It was my fault as well. Only go,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac.

His arms fell from her. He stumbled to his feet.

She would not let him look at her. Her hands were on him and thrust him before her to the door. All was not lost. All was gained. She loved him. It had been of him she had been dreaming as she stood at the window looking out. All her proud silence had meant but the one thing; she loved him; how passionately her silence and her terror showed. But as he heard her turn the lock against him, he felt like a criminal thrust out from sanctuary and abandoned to his fate.

CHAPTER XXIV

The Permissionnaire

JILL was walking up through the wet woods above the Manoir. It was still early and the air fresh with rain which had fallen heavily all night. The clouds had rolled away at dawn, leaving a vast immaculate sky. And now the sun streamed forth over the drenched and dripping world with almost summer sultriness.

Two days had passed since the evening when Marthe had come; two days and three nights; but Jill had not seen her again. She had spent the hours of daylight out of doors; but she had not gone to the Manoir. Every morning she got into the car and drove far, far away, seeing new country and all the springtide glory. On the first day it had been inland she had sped, up and over the tablelands, through the great birch woods where sheets of wood anemones grew in the dappled shade of swaying catkins; and yesterday she had followed, high up, the course of the swollen, passionate river and found a ruined castle standing at the bottom of a ravine with torrents wildly wreathing at its foot. She had spent the afternoon there in a strange solitude. An eagle had floated over her as she lay on the grassy ledges of masonry. She had watched a pair of tits building their nest in a hole near by and a flock of tiny mountain sheep, wandering down the valley, looked up at her with little mush-

room-tinted faces. She had lain there and thought of Dick.

For these two days she and Dick had hardly spoken to each other. She did not know how he passed the hours; though he went away every morning with his canvases. He had not shown her his work, nor had she asked to see it; for she suspected that Dick's painting was to him what the ruined castle was to her; a place where he could be alone.

But though their days were thus solitary, the nights had brought them near; terribly near, to Jill's apprehension. Their beds stood side by side; by stretching out a hand they could touch each other. And in the middle of the night Dick would speak to her. — 'Jill — I'm not sleeping. May I come to you?' A strange voice.

Then, like a little boy, afraid at night, creeping to his mother, he would come beside her and lay his head on her shoulder and she would hold him close. So they would lie, saying nothing, and she knew that she was a refuge to him. But he did not sleep; nor did she; and lying there, her arms around him, she would look over his head at the moonlit square of window and listen to the river roaring outside, and try to remember the days, the years, when they had been happy together. For now they were unhappy.

It was not lack she felt in Dick; it was a terrible, a suffocating sense of overflow rather than lack. He took refuge; and yet the longing in him was to give rather than to receive. He asked nothing of her, ex-

cept refuge; he wanted nothing. All that he wanted was to hide in her and to make her feel his love. And nothing in her life had ever hurt like this love and its helpless pity.

She had come this morning to find Marthe. She was determined before they left Buissac to wrest some form of recantation from Madame de Lamouderie; but first she must see Marthe, and she went early to the Manoir to be sure of finding her.

And at the door Joseph told her that Mademoiselle had gone out.

'Gone out?' said Jill. Standing there, looking at Joseph, she knew that he shared her sense of something strange and wrong in this unaccustomed absence. It was in the morning that Marthe had her harp, and all her household tasks.

'Mademoiselle had a bad night,' he volunteered. 'She did not sleep. She has gone into the woods. Médor is with her; she said that a walk would be good for her and Médor. She will be back at eleven to read to Madame la comtesse.'

If she and Dick were unhappy, so was Marthe.

'I will try to find her,' said Jill.

Joseph led her to the gate in the wall and indicated the way that led upwards through the sycamores. When the sycamores were passed, there was a belt of chestnut forest and then the path ran through lighter woodlands of ash, beech, and hazel that climbed the side of a steep valley. The young green leaves sparkled in the sunlight, and Jill saw, down in the valley cleft,

the wild, tawny tresses of a mountain rivulet. What wild, sweet beauty everywhere; and with what a heavy heart she saw and heard it! Marthe's heart was heavy, too.

Suddenly, at a turn, the path ran out into a narrow road where a stone bridge crossed the valley, and sitting on the low parapet, her arms laid out along her knees, her eyes fixed on the ground, was Marthe.

Something unspeakably strange came to Jill from her attitude. She was exhausted. Standing within the shadow of the woods to gaze at her, Jill seemed to feel the cold sweat on her brow, the thread-like beating of her sick heart. Or was she reading her own despair into Marthe's demeanour? Was Marthe only very tired after the sleepless night? Was she only listening, as she rested there with Médor beside her, to the wood-wren?

Jill's eyes were drawn up to the little bird. It was poised, high on the branch of a tall tree above Marthe's head, and its wings drooped and shivered in an ecstasy of pleading as it sang out, passionately, the last reiterated notes of its refrain. But Marthe was not listening. In the silence that followed the bird's last cadence, she lifted her eyes and saw who it was who stood there; and Jill felt a cold, dark, heavy gaze rest upon her. 'Then it is true,' she thought. 'Madame de Lamouderie has told her that we know; and the story is true.' — 'But not true as Madame de Lamouderie, as Dick, would understand,' came the answering thought, once

more, beneath the piercing grief of the acceptance. And she must know Marthe's truth. So she smiled at her. She went forward and sat down beside her. 'You have found the wood-wren by yourself,' she said, smiling on into Marthe's eyes. And now that she thus looked into those beautiful eyes the sense of something heavenly once more flooded her heart. She took Marthe's hand. 'It seems to me that I have not seen you for years and years.'

It was with difficulty that Marthe found her thoughts and her words. 'I imagined that you had left Buissac,' was what she said.

'Without saying good-bye? Oh — come now!' said Jill. She wanted to cry, for that Marthe should have thought this gave the full measure of their calamity; but she uttered her school-girl 'Come now!' and continued to smile into Marthe's eyes.

The bird, silenced for a moment by her approach, resumed its singing; the melodious little ditty, full of the plaintive sweetness of spring, followed by the piping of the strangely urgent, reiterated notes. They sat and listened, hand in hand, and Marthe looked up at him, with her.

When he had finished, she, too, smiled and murmured, '*Le petit ange.*'

'Yes. That is it exactly. A little angel. And always so lonely; by himself; on tall trees,' said Jill, feeling a strange happiness come to her, from the bird's song, from Marthe's smile.

'But he sings *to* something,' said Marthe, still smil-

ing into her eyes. 'He is solitary, but not alone; like an angel in that, too.'

'Yes; that's it. And I like it so much better than angels in choirs, don't you? Solitary angels — but all singing *to* something. — Why do I always have such lovely thoughts when I am with you, Marthe?'

'Because you are you, Jill.'

They were sitting hand in hand, looking at each other, and the warbler had again begun to sing over their heads. 'Tell me, Marthe,' said Jill, contemplating her friend, 'have you had lovers?'

Without start or blush, Marthe Ludérac looked back at her. 'Why do you ask?' she questioned.

Madame de Lamouderie had not told her. 'I heard something — in Buissac,' Jill found.

Marthe continued to look at her. 'In Buissac?' she repeated.

'Yes.' Jill nodded. 'Nothing very definite, dear Marthe. But enough to make me — wonder.'

'It would give you great pain if it were true?'

Jill tried to think. It had already given her great pain. 'I should not be less fond of you, but it would give me pain.'

'Why?' asked Marthe Ludérac.

'Why?' Jill repeated. It was strange to be asked why. 'Perhaps because I think of you as set apart.'

'As too unhappy ever to be loved, you mean?'

'No; — no, Marthe. As too beautiful.' Jill struggled to make her thought clear to herself as well as to Marthe. 'Too beautiful to be loved — and then left.

A lover leaves you, doesn't he? He doesn't love enough. That's our English feeling, perhaps. If you love a great deal, it can't be lightly. It's something grave. It lasts.' Jill's voice was trembling a little.

'But life may part lovers,' said Marthe Ludérac, and her voice now was cold and dark and heavy, as her gaze had been. 'Love need not be light to know itself measured. What is more grave than to be doomed to part?'

'Yes. That is true.' The sickening grief was creeping over Jill again, but still she struggled to accept Marthe's truth. 'Only — you must hide, mustn't you? — for that kind of love. You must lie. It must be difficult, I mean, to keep it beautiful.'

She had dropped her eyes to the hand she held and she could not raise them. They were heavy with the tears of her acceptance. And more than the bitter grief for the spoiled past was in her. When she heard that cold, dark, heavy voice, it made her think of Dick. As if far, far away, the warbler was singing still; but the happiness was gone.

Then she heard Marthe say: 'I have never had a lover.'

For a moment Jill was almost overwhelmed. Tears blinded her. She turned to her friend. She could not look at her, but she put her arms around her neck and whispered, 'Oh, Marthe — forgive me!'

'My friend. My dear, dear Jill,' Marthe Ludérac murmured. But she had taken Jill's arms and she gently put her away.

'Do you forgive me?' Jill whispered, clinging to her hand, and it seemed to her that with the question she had cut Marthe still more deeply, for her voice was quick and short as she answered: 'There is nothing to forgive.' She held Jill from her and turned her head away and fixed her eyes upon the ground, and Jill heard that she was breathing quickly. 'There is nothing to forgive,' she repeated. And they sat thus, for a moment, in silence.

'Let me tell you then,' said Marthe. 'I did not know that echoes of that old story had reached Buissac. Yet it is natural that it should be known. It is natural that it should be believed — of me. It was at Bordeaux, after my mother's death, during the last winter of the war, that I took a soldier into my room for the night.'

'Was he ill? Unhappy? Had he nowhere else to go?' Jill asked, timidly, for Marthe had paused and in her voice was a world of haughty solitude.

Marthe Ludérac glanced at her for a moment. 'You guess the truth, at once; the truth that no one else would care to believe. He was very unhappy and he had nowhere else to go. He was a little *permissionnaire* and he came on that cold, wet night into the restaurant where I ate. A cheap, poor place; it was my first winter in Bordeaux and I had difficulty in living. All the tables were full, so I beckoned him to come to mine. He came so timidly, like a gentle, frightened dog. I saw how unhappy he was. He had a young, good face, thoughtful, sensitive — with grey

eyes far apart. He was a student; not of the soldier type. At once we understood each other, at once he trusted me; and while we ate he told me of his plight. He had come back from the front for his three days and had found his wife with a lover. He had not a word of anger for her. He said that he had never satisfied her. He had never been the man she needed. But there was no more home for him, and all the night before, and all that day, he had walked the streets, dazed with grief. And next morning, at dawn, he must return to the war. So I took him back to my room where there was light and warmth and my bed, and there he slept all night, exhausted, and I sat in the chair, and slept a little, too. When the day came, I heated water for him to wash, and made his breakfast for him and went with him to the train, so that he was not alone among all the others who had wives and mothers and sisters to say good-bye to them. He was killed ten days later. I heard it, long afterwards, from a comrade to whom he gave my address.'

'Oh, my dear Marthe,' Jill murmured. 'Of course it was like that.'

'No; not of course,' said Marthe Ludérac, and her softened look hardened again to the haughty solitude. 'I am not a woman of whom "of course" can be said. I am not a woman who would not take a lover for those reasons you gave. Pride might keep me from him; but not the thought of parting. Life is so dark, so short; if the brightness were there, I do not say that

I should not take it. With my poor little *permissionnaire;* no. But there might have been another man.' And now her eyes met Jill's and the pale, violent blush that Jill had seen before suddenly swept like a tide, from brow to chin, over her silver face. 'I have often longed for love,' she said, looking steadily at Jill. 'Passionately I have longed. Can you imagine what it is to have a heart full of love and always, everywhere, to find oneself shunned? Animals are all that I have ever had. That is why I am perhaps a little foolish about them. There is so much to give, and they must receive it all.'

'But I am here now,' said Jill in a trembling voice. She felt as if she were adrift on a stormy sea. 'I mean — you are loved now. Anyone who knows you must love you: — and you are known.' And as she heard herself say these stumbling words the very air seemed loud with an unuttered name.

And as if she heard it — or feared too much to hear it — Marthe Ludérac rose and said, rapidly, impetuously: 'I wish you had never come to Buissac. I wish you had never seen me. I mean sorrow only; — sorrow; sorrow,' she repeated, fiercely. 'It is the worst of all; — worse than being always alone; — to feel that one can only bring sorrow to those one loves.' She walked away down the woodland path, and it was as if she were leaving Jill for ever, lest she should hear that name.

Jill followed her. 'But you don't, you don't,' she said. She hardly knew what she was saying. 'And if

you do — I am glad all the same. — I am glad to have known you, whatever happens.'

Making no reply, Marthe Ludérac went on ahead.

The path ran steeply down among the trees. Below them they heard the rushing of the mountain torrent and saw its passionately hurrying gleam, now here, now there, among the spangled branches. Marthe Ludérac, though she went so swiftly, not turning to look behind, did not forget her friend, for she would pause, when a branch crossed the way, to hold it back for Jill, but Jill knew that the unspoken name separated them as truly as if Graham had walked between them.

Suddenly the Manoir roof appeared below among its sycamores. Marthe stopped short. 'It is my hour for reading. Will you come in?'

Jill hesitated. 'No; not this morning. This afternoon, perhaps.'

It was Marthe now who paused. 'Your husband does not come this afternoon to paint her portrait?'

'I don't know,' said Jill miserably. They stood there; she was still behind Marthe.

Then, as if forcing herself, Marthe Ludérac turned round and faced her friend. 'That story. Does your husband know?'

Jill took breath. Her eyes on Marthe's were wide. 'Yes,' she said.

'It was he who told you of it?'

'Yes.'

'It was she who told him? Ten days ago?'

'Yes.'

'And she spoke of lovers? Not of one only? Not of the little soldier only? — She said that I had taken lovers?'

'Yes,' said Jill. 'But she made him believe that she was sorry for you.'

At that a terrible look crossed Marthe Ludérac's face. It blanched with fury. So white, so flashing was the look that had the old lady stood before her she would, Jill felt, have been consumed.

'Perhaps she believed it,' Jill heard herself faltering.

Marthe Ludérac looked down upon the ground. 'Yes, she may have believed it. I was turned out of the house where I lodged. The two women who kept it are known to the curé here.'

'She is not safe to live with, Marthe,' said Jill in a low voice. 'You must know that already, I think. She's your wounded cat and you took her in from pity; but she bites your hand.'

'Yes,' said Marthe Ludérac. She looked away, down at the Manoir roof; looked for a long time; and Jill saw the passion falling away, pulse by pulse, from her face. It was cold and still as she said at last: 'You remind me of justice.'

'Of justice? — You mean you will turn her out?'

'No; I do not mean that. She is the wounded cat. That is the truth. — That is the truth,' Mademoiselle Ludérac repeated, fixing her eyes on the ground.

'And we know why she bit my hand. We know that, do we not?'

'Yes,' said Jill, in the lowest voice.

'I shall say nothing. I shall do nothing,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac. 'I do not think it is she who has surprised me.'

'Oh — but, Marthe!' Jill broke down the barrier that rose between them. It was there; a wall of ice; but she broke it down and seized Marthe's hand. 'Don't misjudge Dick! She is so clever — so horribly clever! She knew how to do it! She knew how to drop in the poison! He has been so miserable.'

Marthe stood still, as if stricken to the heart. 'I do not misjudge him.'

'I mean — See him — Let him explain' — Jill heard herself, unbelievably uttering, while she saw, at last, clearly, that this was what she wanted; for Dick; for Marthe. They must see each other. They must understand.

Marthe did not speak or attempt to draw away her hand. She left it lying in Jill's, inertly, and they stood there, not looking at each other.

From below, like the sound of a sunken bell in a drowned city, they heard the notes of the Manoir clock, faint and mournful, striking eleven.

'I must go,' Marthe muttered. 'She will be waiting for me. Good-bye.'

CHAPTER XXV

The Last Reading

WHILE Marthe Ludérac and Jill were in the woods, Graham was painting in the valley road. He had gone out at eight, walking a long way up the valley and finding no subject that could chain his thought. Then he returned, and not far from Buissac set down his easel and began to paint the turn of river that happened to be before him, framed on the right by the distant jut of the promontory. As the hour of eleven approached, a temptation, daily renewed, daily beaten off, assailed him; and this morning he yielded to it. He left his painting materials at the Ecu d'Or and walked up to the Manoir. If he arrived thus, after the reading had begun, she could not escape him. Even if she left the room directly, he would have seen her. He felt now that he could not go on living unless he saw her.

With a sense of the inevitable that was like an hallucination, he entered the pale drawing-room and saw the two women before him; and he fixed his bright, fierce gaze upon them, challenging their right to question his presence. Madame de Lamouderie sat in her chair on one side of the fire and near her, between her and the window, sat Mademoiselle Ludérac, with her book.

Graham walked up to them. He took Madame de Lamouderie's hand and bent over it; he bowed to Mademoiselle Ludérac, and he said: 'I felt that I must see my portrait this morning and hear the end of "Dominique." I hope it's not finished yet.'

Madame de Lamouderie was, apparently, too astounded for utterance and no word came from Mademoiselle Ludérac. The only sound that answered him was a low growl from old Médor on the hearth-rug; and there was indeed a strangeness in Graham's voice that the dog's ear might well recognize.

He waited, however, for no reply. He fetched his easel and his chair, placed them; set out his colours, and looked from his canvas to his sitter. And as she met his eyes, half hypnotized, perhaps, the old lady seemed to acquiesce in his audacity. Her head took its prescribed attitude; she folded her hands, placing the right, with its old seal ring and dimmed old diamond, uppermost, as she had been told to do. And then, after a moment's interval, Mademoiselle Ludérac resumed her reading. From where he sat Graham, today, could see her without turning his head.

He listened, while he painted, half unconsciously, and his mind was drawn to the words she read by her voice rather than by their meaning. For she had reached the burning love-scene where, for the first and last time, Dominique takes Madeleine into his arms: and it was with difficulty that she read. Alien to his sympathies, and almost to his comprehension, as were the standards that sustained and separated the

lovers, Graham listened with a growing anxiety and astonishment, so terribly did the human truth of helpless passion flame through the chill, retrospective style. How could she read this scene, he asked himself; how could he listen? Was it not their love, their embrace that she read of? Steadily, slowly, her voice went on, but with a betraying bitterness as though the words touched her lips with gall and wormwood, and Graham, as he heard that bitterness, felt that a hot flush mounted to his forehead. A small, snake-like smile curled the corner of Madame de Lamouderie's lips as she watched them both.

The burning scene was over. Madeleine had escaped. The hero, following the fashion of his day, managed to faint: '*Je tombai roide sur le carreau.*' It almost took one back to Saint-Preux and Julie. 'Never mind. He knows what he's about, Fromentin,' thought Graham, and he took breath and looked hard at his canvas, and there came to him, as an after-taste, the visionary quality of the book; passion looked back on from a far distance; danger remembered in security; youth seen from middle age; and no depiction of present anguish could have had that savour of tears; tears never again to be shed; never to be forgotten.

'How is Madame Graham?' asked Madame de Lamouderie with a harsh suddenness.

'She is quite well again, thank you. Haven't you seen her?' Graham found a bright, hard voice.

'No, I have not seen her. You have been more fortunate than I, perhaps, Marthe?'

Mademoiselle Ludérac glanced at her from her book. 'I met her. Just now.'

'You are indeed fortunate in your meetings, Marthe; but too secretive. I should have asked you for news of our charming friend had I known you so favoured,' said Madame de Lamouderie, while the snake-like smile curled up towards her nostril.

Poor little Cécile Léonore of the beech forest; to what vast distances was she not sunken! Graham could well interpret the glassy stare of the great black eyes. Since they had last met, since he had given her that farewell kiss, the very firmament above her had altered and every star was now against her. He looked at her with a quelling eye as though he faced a tigress. He even dared to smile at her. 'Be good this morning,' he said, 'and we shall make great strides.' But it was with effrontery he spoke, for how could she fail to read his gaze? 'Yes; I am changed to you,' was what it said. 'Yes, she has changed me. Because of her I now know you to be false. And I am desperate with love and you must bear with it that it should be so, since we understand desperation in love, you and I.'

And even as these words passed through his mind he saw that they liberated him. She read him. He could not conceal himself from her. So let him at last drink to his fill of the longed-for beauty. He turned his eyes from Madame de Lamouderie and looked deliberately at Mademoiselle Ludérac and her face as she sat in profile to him was at last his own. He saw her. He saw her to his utmost need. The daffodil was within

his hand, a flame that he possessed and sheltered.

She did not even glance at him. She raised her book and began to read again.

Mon pauvre ami! me dit-elle; il fallait en venir là. Si vous saviez combien je vous aime! Je ne vous l'aurais pas dit hier; aujourd'hui cela peut s'avouer, puisque c'est le mot défendu qui nous sépare.

Elle ajouta, je crois, une ou deux paroles que je n'entendis pas; puis elle s'éloigna doucement comme une vision qui s'évanouit, et je ne la revit plus, ni ce soir-là, ni le lendemain, ni jamais.

Still leaning back in his chair Graham had not taken his eyes from her face.

'Is that the end?' asked Madame de Lamouderie.

Mademoiselle Ludérac sat there under her eyes and under Graham's eyes.

'That is the end,' she said.

'But there is another chapter.'

'It says no more of them. They are parted,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac, and now she raised her eyes and looked at Graham, a poised, sword-like look; and his eyes, at last, dropped before it.

'Ah, that we do not feel credible, do we!' said Madame de Lamouderie, her face distorted with its sneer. 'Lovers in romances may assert that they do not see each other again and that the embrace is not renewed; but in life such resolutions are always broken; is it not so, Monsieur Graham?'

'I hope so, for their sakes,' said Graham.

'Bravo! Bravo! You are honest. Do you not admire such honesty, Marthe? Courage, after all, even

brutality, are all that is needed with us weak women. Is it not so, Marthe?'

For a moment Mademoiselle Ludérac sat silent. Then, without a word, she rose and left the room.

Graham, automatically, took up his brushes. He looked at the old lady and, deliberately then, with a malignant amusement for her plight, touched in the sneer that twisted her lip and nostril. Only for a moment did she control herself, only for a moment wait to note what his next move would be.

'You have driven her away, you see,' she said. 'The last thing you wish to do, is it not?'

'The last thing,' said Graham, smiling, as he placed a cruel accent. 'But we were both at fault. Our conversation isn't really fit for her ears, is it?'

'Not fit for the ears of your Saint Cecilia? Is that what you would say?'

'Precisely.'

'And it was her you came to see? In spite of my warnings?'

'It was her I came to see; — very much in spite of your warnings.'

'Why do you not follow her then?'

'Because she is my Saint Cecilia and I do not wish to displease her.'

'You will not displease her. That I can promise you. I can promise you, Monsieur Graham, bold and brutal as you are, that she is as eager as you are for that embrace.' But as she saw the look of rage that crossed his face, her own look altered. The sneer dropped.

She drew herself upright. A baleful splendour of demeanour fell upon her. 'Mademoiselle Ludérac is her own mistress and mistress of this house,' she said, weighing her words and braving his eyes. 'I am powerless to do more for her safety than I have done. One thing only I must demand. It is my right. That I shall not be put into the position of a pander, a go-between. I forbid you, categorically forbid you, to carry on your intrigue under this roof. My relation to your wife is my authority. Even you will hardly dispute it. Do not carry on your intrigue under this roof. The woods at this season offer many convenient bowers for lovers. — But perhaps I need not tell you this.'

Graham resumed his painting. 'You know,' he remarked, after a silence, and with a singular calm, 'it's a pity to do what you are doing. I understand you. I've an immense tolerance for you. Even your lie of the other night, I can swallow. I ask you now to be merciful to yourself. You know what she is as well as I do. She's a holy saint. And it's hard for you and me to believe in her, I own. But why not face it? Why not grant me the right to worship her? Why not be content to help me to come here and look at her?'

For a moment his calm, his terrible detachment, checked and arrested even the heaped-up waters of the old lady's fury. Then they broke forth and she contained herself no longer. 'Not in my presence!' she cried, and leaning forward she thrust her face at him. 'Not in my presence! I will not bear it! To be ignored for that little peasant! To be put out by that little

prostitute! It was not a lie! Ask her if it was a lie! — She will not deny that she took soldiers into her room at Bordeaux. I am a liar, am I? I am to be content to be a liar and despised by you, while she is to be your holy saint? No! Monsieur Graham! No! One at a time, if you please!' And stumbling out of her chair, knocking over the easel as she pushed past him, Madame de Lamouderie hastened, with all the galvanized rapidity of her passion, out of the room, and as she went Graham heard that she was sobbing.

He sat still where she had left him for some moments. 'Poor old devil,' was the thought that came to him.

The canvas lay face downward on the floor; as he picked it up, Madame de Lamouderie's head came upside down and the gaze of the eyes, thus inverted, had a startling malignancy. Righting it, he examined the canvas. No damage had been done; but should he ever finish it now? Should he ever again see the Manoir? He wondered for a moment, standing and looking round the pale, mysterious room, where Eurydice, Saint Cecilia, had first appeared to him, printing its aspect on his mind. Then he put away his work, as if, indeed, he were to return, and went into the hall.

Joseph stood there, waiting for him. 'Mademoiselle is in the garden and asks that Monsieur should go to her there.' These were the amazing words he uttered.

As he passed through the garden door, Graham felt that Joseph shot a dark glance after him.

CHAPTER XXVI

In the Garden

TO step from the house into the garden was like passing from a vault into some strange, fierce resurrection. The great sun flaming in the midday sky was like the sound of trumpets. Aromatic odours exhaled in ardour through the quivering air. So hot, so bright, so clamorous was the outer world that Graham for a moment paused and looked about him in a sort of stupor.

Then, at the further end, he saw Marthe Ludérac sitting on the bench against the garden wall. She was waiting for him, and he remembered that autumn day when he had first seen the garden. This was the presence, this the consummation, for which it had waited. She rose as he approached her and stood there to receive him.

Cold and white she stood, under the hot sunlight; remote; repudiating. Ah, but how unavailingly she fixed those haughty, unappealing eyes upon him. Her eyes, her hands might repulse him and oceans might flow between them; and years; but they were for all time intimate. They knew each other. Under the blue window with the moonlit air blowing in upon them she had been as close as a consenting lover. He remembered how close; and so did she; he remembered

his kisses; as she did. Not all her will could obliterate those moments.

Bareheaded, he stood in the path before her and every least detail of her sunlit face was his. The barrier in his heart, and in hers, was down, and his senses were unafraid of her. A bitter ecstasy filled his heart.

She spoke to him. 'I have asked you to come. It is not for my sake. It is for your wife. I love her. For her sake I ask you to pursue me no longer.'

It was a strangely worded request.

'I've not pursued you,' said Graham. Old Médor, lying beside the bench in the sun, lifted his head as he heard his voice and uttered a low, uncertain growl. 'Not unless you call this morning pursuit. All the rest has been chance. You know it.'

'I do not know it,' said Mademoiselle Ludérac, and he was now to hear how fierce, under its quiet, her voice could be. 'You came before in the morning, when you were sure of finding me. You came to seek me on the island — though you had no need to give me the message. You have pursued me from the first, and though it was by chance that you found your way to my room the other night, it was not by chance that you entered and insulted me.'

'No — no; — you can't say that. That's unworthy of you; — unworthy of us both,' Graham muttered, eyeing her. 'Even then you understood. Even then you forgave; because you longed for me as much as I longed for you.'

Marthe Ludérac's face took on an arctic pallor. 'I

understood you then. What you say of me is true. But I did not know what I know now; that you came to me believing me to be a light woman.' And with no change of tone, though more swiftly, more scornfully, she added, glancing beyond him, 'Control yourself, I beg. Madame de Lamouderie is at her window watching us.'

Let her watch them! He blessed her malignancy. It had brought him here; set him in this miraculous solitude face to face with Marthe Ludérac. He saw now why she had sent for him. She would have risked no such encounter had she not thought herself securely armed against him.

'So you heard that. I wonder where,' he said. 'No; I don't mind her; but I'll be careful. That story parted me from you for ten whole days. Whether I really believed it or not I can't say. I think I tried to believe it, because it seemed to part us; to save us. And I've struggled — though you may not believe it of me. Then I found you again, and when I saw you, on that night, it made no difference. Had it been true, or false, my conduct would have been the same.'

Now she was alone with him indeed; more surely alone, despite the watcher at the window, than the other night, for every shield against him was gone. And as he put the truth before her, her eyes, for the first time, under the pressure of his gaze, faltered. She looked away from him. She was terribly white.

'So there's an end to all disguises,' Graham said.

'Let us walk,' said Marthe Ludérac, after a moment.

They turned and walked down the central path towards the house. Old Médor, casting a reproachful glance at his mistress, got upon his feet and limped at their heels. At the open door, where he had remained standing, Joseph discreetly withdrew, and there, at her upper window, sitting in full view, was Madame de Lamouderie, and her ancient face, marked like the moon's with cavernous shadows, looked like a skull set up to stare at them. Let her stare. Something dark and dangerous in Graham's nature rejoiced in the sinister fairy-tale background of his love. Here he walked in the sunlight with his heavenly Eurydice and all Hades might yawn before them, all its furies shriek, for any faltering they could bring to his exultant heart.

'So there's an end to all disguises,' he repeated; and they paused at the end of the path, invisible now to the watcher above. 'They are gone. There's nothing between us.'

He was looking straight into those wonderful long-sought eyes; eyes of wide, windswept, lonely dawn, with its slender moon, its morning star. Never on earth had there been eyes like Marthe Ludérac's, and to believe them attainable was as if in the fairy-tale one stretched forth one's hand and found that one could touch the silver moon. 'So why keep up defences?' he said, and he almost smiled at her. There had been no tenderness between them. His smile was hardly tender now. It possessed rather than caressed her.

'We keep them up for Jill,' said Marthe Ludérac.

The helpless physical closeness of the other night was as nothing compared to this avowal.

'You mean — it's only because of Jill?'

'How should it not be?'

'We belong to each other — but for Jill?'

Marthe Ludérac turned away her eyes and made no reply.

'It's not as if I didn't love Jill,' Graham muttered. 'It seems to me that I've never loved her so much.'

'That is because you feel her menaced,' said Marthe Ludérac.

They went on then, up a mossy side path where the sun seldom fell.

'Listen to me,' said Graham. The path was narrow, their shoulders nearly brushed as they went, their hands could, with a slight gesture, touch; but they walked on evenly, sad Médor following. 'That may be true. But we must face the truth. You've changed my life, as I've changed yours. We are all menaced. But what Jill would want first of all from us is the truth. And the truth is that you and I belong to each other. You must come away with me. Jill is young and strong and she has her home and friends. I've taken her away from everything she loves; it's my life, not her own she lives. It will be horrible for her; but it won't all be loss; and she'd rather lose me than keep me, loving you. — We must leave Buissac together. At once.'

They had reached the further end of the garden and were come to the wall again and out into the sun. 'It is

impossible,' said Marthe Ludérac. She did not look at him, but straight before her.

And even as he had spoken, a doubt had fallen upon him. Jill might bear it; but how could he? How could he cut Jill out of his life? The deep paternal instincts interwoven in long-rooted marriage cried out against him. How leave his wife, his child, his dear, dear Jill? It was impossible. He could not contradict Marthe Ludérac.

They crossed the width of the garden, under the wall. Here black currant bushes grew and their spicy odour filled the hot air. They turned the corner and went under lilac branches that cast a shadow at their feet.

'Then' — Graham lowered his voice and did not look at her as he walked, evenly, carefully beside her — 'we must be secret lovers. Here. Now. Before I leave Buissac. It's torment for us, whichever way we turn; but that's the best torment. When we part we shall have had each other.'

They walked on steadily, emerging from the lilacs; visible once more to the sentinel skull.

And Marthe Ludérac said nothing. She was silent. Horror-stricken? Frozen in repudiation? He shot a glance at her. White, fixed, considering, her eyes bent on the ground, she walked beside him; but it was not in horror or repulsion. As Graham felt and saw the substance of her silence, the blood surged again before his eyes and he heard the pounding of his heart. 'You will?' he said. 'To-night? Every night before I go?'

Still she was silent. He could hardly believe in her beautiful, terrible silence. They reached the house again before she spoke. And they were the same words as before: 'It is impossible.'

'No; no! Not impossible!' Her silence had given him an immense advantage. It was as if he had felt her come into his arms. She could not now take herself back. 'Not impossible. I would come when the others are asleep. I know the way. And I would guard you. No one would ever know. I can stay on in Buissac. Madame de Lamouderie's portrait is our screen. Even now, up there, she does not dream of what is between us. I will keep it from her; from Jill. We are strong enough; both of us. And the one impossible thing is that we should not love one another — completely.'

His eyes were on her, and as she felt them her faint, strange, violent blush answered him. Her face was inundated with her awareness of him and with her pain. And cursing himself for his grossness, his brutality, he saw that it was pain; and then, as she walked on in her silence, that she did not shrink from it, or from him. Overwhelmed, even desperate she might be, but it seemed to him that she resented nothing; that she saw as plainly as he did their necessity and their resources. Only after the silence had grown long, after they had walked and turned again, did he hear her speak. A faint, a rigid voice. 'No; no,' she said; and the words seemed forced from her. 'I could not bear it.'

'Do you mean secret loving? — or parting afterwards?'

'I can see you go. I thought that you were gone. I can see you go, now.'

'Can you? I can't see myself. It will have to be secret loving, unless you will come with me.'

'We know that we must part. That is our completion. There is no choice,' she said. 'I will not go with you and have Jill left. I will not love you secretly — and part from you afterwards. — No; no! That I could not bear!' she cried passionately, startling him with the sudden cry, not looking at him.

He held himself from seizing her. 'Marthe! — Listen. My darling. It will be easier. One can die if one has lived. You don't understand. How should you?'

'I do understand. I do. I will not have it so.'

Her hand as she spoke so passionately, though in so low a tone, had clenched itself against her chest as though she drew back from an invisible antagonist. The watcher up above them must wonder to see that desperate gesture and, lifting his eyes to the window, Graham saw that it was a wonder past endurance. Madame de Lamouderie flung wide the sash. She leaned out.

'Marthe! Have you forgotten the hour? Do you not know that it is long past the time for our *déjeuner!*' she screamed.

Marthe Ludérac looked up at her almost unseeingly. As awareness came, it was a weary, an enduring awareness. She bowed her head, though she made

no reply to the screaming summons; but as they walked towards the house, she said in a voice changed, charged, hurried: 'There is no more to say, of ourselves. Only one thing I have to ask of you. The old woman there: do not part from her in enmity.'

'Don't speak to me of her!' Graham exclaimed in bitter exasperation. 'You know who it was who told that story of you. There is more to say of ourselves and I do not intend to waste these moments on her.'

'You have misled her. You have been cruel to her. You knew what she was when you came and saw her. You cannot go now leaving her so wretched.'

'No. I don't intend to go. I have her portrait to finish. If I'm decent to her, you'll know why.'

'No, no; I beg of you,' said Marthe Ludérac, standing still before the door and fixing her eyes upon him. 'Do not speak so. It is useless. I refuse what you offer. I refuse it all. We are not to meet again.'

'Marthe — Marthe — Marthe,' Graham murmured. He stood and gazed upon her. 'Be merciful,' he said. 'Tell me that you will see me — if only once again. I can't live without seeing you.'

'It makes it worse. It is a weakness. And it makes it worse,' she said, her eyes on his. 'But go. Go now, and I will see you once again.' She turned from him and went into the house before him.

Joseph waited in the hall. He seemed to have been biding his time, for, as his young mistress entered, followed by the Englishman, he hurried towards the front door and opened it with hasty fingers and stood

there, holding it back, keeping his eyes on Graham until he had passed out.

. . . . . .

The luncheon hour was long over when Graham reached the Ecu d'Or. Monsieur Michon, who served him, told him that Madame had come in to lunch, but had immediately gone out again, in the car. 'And we shall have a storm this afternoon, Monsieur,' he said. 'I warned Madame not to go too far.'

When Graham had taken some food he went up to their sitting-room. On the table lay a note with 'Dick' written on the envelope. He opened it and read:

I saw Marthe this morning. She has never had a lover. It was only a little *permissionnaire* who had nowhere to go, on a winter night, and she took him into her room to sleep and next morning he went back to the war and was killed. I think it would be better if you were to see Marthe. Perhaps this afternoon. I shall be gone for a long time.

Yours ever

JILL

Graham read this over several times before its meaning reached him. It was as if he had outstripped time, he was so far ahead of all that Jill had to tell him. He had outstripped time, but Jill's comprehension, Jill's courage and loyalty, followed close on the trail of his flaming course. It was evident to him, as he tried to retrace his own steps and to mark where Jill had come upon them, that he was to spare her nothing.

'But that's all to the good, isn't it,' Graham mut-

tered, trying to think, as he held Jill's note. 'There'll be nothing to explain.'

Was it all to the good? He could think no longer — of Jill, or of Marthe. The heavy day pressed on him like a pall and he had not slept for an hour the night before. He went upstairs to their room, flung himself on his bed, and fell, almost at once, into a profound and exhausted slumber.

CHAPTER XXVII

The Storm

'I'M like the Wandering Jew,' thought Jill as, on the afternoon of that blazing day, she raced her car through the spring landscape. Jill could never, in the most tragic moments, address herself in tragic terms, and it steadied her nerves now to see herself in this comic, if dolorous, aspect of a creature who must keep in movement from dawn to dusk. For Dick might return at any moment to the Ecu d'Or and she could not see him yet. He must rest, and she must rest; a night must pass over them before they could speak to one another. She, too, had hardly slept, and until night she would keep away from him. Ah, if only she and Dick could, both of them, go to sleep for days and days and wake to find everything understood between them without one word. Her very flesh shrank from the searing thought of what they might have to say to one another.

So she drove. She took the valley road up towards the gorges and climbed the mountain to the great tablelands, there to make the widest circle of all her adventurings, through the birch forests, down into gently wooded valleys, where apple-blossom was breaking into bud, up to the plain once more and past a chain of lakes that glittered in the sunlight under the sultry sky like polished steel. Everything was splendid, but

nothing beautiful this afternoon, she thought, and the white heat beat up from the road into her eyes and the yellow heat from the sun beat down into her brain. She paused at a wayside *buvette* to raise her hood so that she might drive in shelter and went inside and sat down at a rustic table on the sanded floor to rest and drink a glass of beer. The woman who came to serve her had eyes swollen with weeping, and as Jill looked up at her kindly, she told her suddenly that her little girl lay dead in the next room. Would Madame like to see her — she was as beautiful as an angel. Jill did not want to see her at all, but she followed the mother into the dark, airless inner room and saw lying on the bed, a candle burning beside it, the pathetic small body; very beautiful, indeed, with waxen face and earnest, gentle smile. The mother stood, holding her apron to her lips, gazing and weeping, and Jill felt that her own tears fell. It was not only the sight of the dead child that made her cry. Her personal sorrow thus found relief.

Now she went on and came to unknown sign-posts, marking hamlets scattered far inland, with names that smelt of wine and garlic. But the sun had begun to dip down in the sky and she took the turnings to the left so that she should not lose herself too completely. However far away it might be, she was now heading for Buissac.

For some little time she had been aware of ominous noises and falterings in her engine and had disregarded them, and when the car stopped suddenly she got out

to find that her magneto was broken. There was nothing for it but to push the car along into a sheltered spot, and find her way back on foot. She took a path running along the edges of a wood where the budding wayside trees gave, at least, a scant shelter. Her face streamed with sweat, and she passed her silk sleeve over her forehead and took off her cap and fanned herself. At the first opening she turned down into the woodland and here, among the trees, she walked for an hour.

Ominously still it was. Not a bird sang. But a brook went beside her, hurrying down to the Dordogne, and Jill stopped to drink at it and to bathe her smarting eyes. 'What a fool I was to let myself cry,' she muttered.

Suddenly, at a turn of the path, she stood still. This was a familiar spot. She was quite near Buissac. It was here that she had come that very morning — oh, how long ago! This was the same brook; that the same stone bridge where she had seen Marthe sitting, exhausted; where Marthe had looked at her with that dark, that heavy look.

Standing there, gazing at the bridge, a tidal wave of suffering suddenly swept all Jill's hard-held courage from her heart, and for a long, suffocating moment it seemed to her that she hated Marthe Ludérac.

What had been the fatal darkness that had underlain their morning encounter if it had not been the knowledge that they were for ever fixed in enmity? Marthe loved Dick. Marthe had taken Dick from her. How

could he ever come back to her, when that sorceress had cast her magic glance upon him? Dick was sorry for her now. He loved Marthe, and was sorry for her; as Marthe's father had been sorry for his wife. He had never really loved her; never as he loved Marthe. And as these tumultuous thoughts went through her mind, Jill felt herself dashed to and fro on the horrible surges of the tidal wave, unable to feel herself as anything but that darkness and that suffering. It was as if she had never known herself before; as if her self were all that was left to her and as if it were revealed to her to be mere tumult, darkness, and misery.

She stood there, at the entrance to the descending woodland path, her head bent down, her hands deeply thrust into her pockets. The memory of the dead child's face returned to her; the gentle, earnest look. It had escaped. It was better to escape. Life wasn't worth it. It came to nothing. With all her heart Jill, for that black moment, and for the first time in her happy existence, wished that she were dead.

Suddenly, deep in the silent woodland, far, far off, she heard the inconsequent yet intent note of the chiff-chaff. Not the wood-wren — oh, she was glad it was not the beautiful song — only the chiff-chaff; only something one could bear — like the simple toy put into the weak hands of a convalescent child. Foolish little bird; dear little bird. As she listened to it, it made her think, first, of home; of bells at Easter; and she felt the tidal wave slowly sinking, slowly drawing away, the darkness shallower; the light coming softly through

and breathing into her heart once more. And then she remembered Marthe's eyes of resurrection; Marthe's face as, at the gate, on the spring evening when they had first found each other, she had laid Jill's hand against her cheek and said, 'This dear heart will be kind to everything.' How could she have dreamed that the past was spoiled? The past, and Marthe as she had known her in it, was the one sure thing.

She stood there, softly breathing in her convalescence, aged, had she known it, by those moments of experience as decades of her former life could not have aged her, and the last thought that came to her — from the chiff-chaff's song, from the memory of Marthe's face and Marthe's words — was of a hunted fox; and then of a hunted cat. The wretched old lady down there below the woods. What had she been suffering? And was not her suffering the worst of all?

'I must see her,' Jill muttered to herself. And it seemed now clearly the next step. She could not leave Buissac without seeing her; in kindness, if that were possible. She must try to make her own that she had lied, but to make her feel that even if she had lied she was understood, not hated. 'I might have been just as bad myself,' thought Jill. 'We're all one. Just as Marthe said.' She went on down the path towards the Manoir.

As she entered the Manoir gate she heard the half-slumberous yet sinister reverberations of distant thunder. The sound of it was like a great snake dragging itself in dusty rolls and coils along the horizon. She

turned to look at the sky, when she had rung, and saw that a vast thunder-cloud had reared its head above the trees, black, magnificent, rimmed against the blue with glittering sunlight. No one answered the bell, and even after she had rung a second time there was a long interval before the door half opened and Joseph peeped out.

'Here I am again, you see, Joseph,' she said. Something in the old man's demeanour affected her unpleasantly. It was almost as if he were unwilling to let her in. 'I've come to take shelter. We're going to have a storm.'

'Mademoiselle has gone out,' said Joseph, still holding the door ajar and peering at Jill with eyes at once furtive and penetrating. 'She is gone to the meadow to fetch up the goat and kid. Madame will perhaps join her there.'

Jill eyed him, pondering. He did not want to let her in. 'It's really Madame la comtesse I've come to see this time,' she said.

'I fear that Madame la comtesse is indisposed today,' said Joseph, and the elastic French *indisposée*, on his lips, was significant of all sorts of warnings. 'Madame will do well not to see her again.'

'Oh, but I must see her before we go away,' said Jill. 'I've not said good-bye to her, and we may be going quite soon.'

'The sooner the better!' said Joseph suddenly; and as Jill gazed at him, astonished and arrested, he put his face close to hers and uttered in a piercing whisper:

'Madame la comtesse is a bad old woman. She will bring Madame no good.'

'But none of us are quite bad or quite good, are we, Joseph?' said Jill in an unsteady voice, for Joseph almost frightened her. 'And even if she's very bad indeed, I'm not afraid of her.'

'Yes; some of us are quite bad, and some quite good,' said Joseph. 'Mademoiselle Marthe — has Madame not discovered that she is quite good? Too good — or she would have driven the evil old woman out long ago.'

'Oh — but that would have been so cruel. She couldn't have done that,' Jill murmured, gazing spellbound at Joseph. 'She's been so dreadfully unhappy, hasn't she?'

'*Eh, bien! tout le monde a ses misères*,' said Joseph with a bitter shrug of the shoulders; 'but some of our calamities are our own fault and some are not. What are the misfortunes of Madame la comtesse to those of Mademoiselle Marthe? Yet she is innocent of all. And we may be sure, Madame, that Madame la comtesse is innocent of nothing.'

'I'm afraid that's true, Joseph. But it makes her more pitiful. That's what Mademoiselle Marthe feels, I know.'

'Yes. That is what she feels. She would give the clothes off her back for any creature for whom she felt pity. It has always been so. See how she dresses; like a peasant, is it not? Yet Mademoiselle Marthe is well-born,' said Joseph, and a passionate resentment, long

suppressed, spoke in his voice. 'She is of noble blood — on her mother's side. Yet see how she dresses. Never one *sou* on herself will she spend when there is that old woman to cosset, to buy sweetmeats for, to tie with pink ribbon. Has Madame ever seen her room? That was Mademoiselle Marthe's work. All muslin and pink ribbon; as a surprise to her on her last birthday. All day long Mademoiselle Marthe worked at it. And I can promise you that it gave pleasure. Yes, she sleeps among the pink ribbons while Mademoiselle Marthe has not a shred of lace on her chemises.'

Jill could hardly repress a smile, even though Joseph touched her so deeply. 'But how well one understands that, Joseph,' she said. 'Who would care for lace on their chemises when there was some one who could be made so happy by pink ribbon? Who would care, I mean, if they were like Mademoiselle Marthe? It's because I know she's like that that I love her so. It's really for Mademoiselle Marthe's sake that I want to see Madame la comtesse.'

Joseph, at this, looked at her for a moment in silence. 'If Madame loves Mademoiselle, the best thing she could do for her would be to leave Buissac,' he then said, slowly.

'But I am going away,' Jill faltered.

'But at once,' said Joseph, his eyes on hers. 'At once. It cannot be too soon. Alone with me, Mademoiselle is safe. She is safe from the old woman when she is alone. She has her own life; she can find happiness. If Madame would go, at once, and persuade

Monsieur to go, all would still be well.' And holding the door with his bony old hand, edging himself half outside, Joseph whispered, still more piercingly: 'If Madame would empower me, now, to go in to Madame la comtesse and tell her that she and Monsieur had left Buissac for good — ah — that would be the blow to deal her! That would be to protect Mademoiselle Marthe!'

Jill stood gazing at him. She felt petrified.

Suddenly, within, the drawing-room door opened and behind Joseph she saw that Madame de Lamouderie had emerged into the hall.

'What is it? What are you doing? Whom are you keeping out? — I will report you at once to Mademoiselle Marthe!' she cried in a strange, hoarse voice that Jill had never heard from her before.

Joseph, not replying, stepped back and Jill entered. She could not have made Joseph that promise. For herself it might have been given; but not for Graham, and it was Graham Joseph feared.

'It's I. It's Jill Graham. I've come to see you,' she said.

Madame de Lamouderie stood on the threshold of the drawing-room, a hand on either side of the doorway, and she stared at Jill, one eye half closed, while her mouth opened and shut like the mouth of a fish lying on a river bank.

'Madame Graham? Is it indeed Madame Graham? — And what do you do here?' she asked in the hoarse voice.

' Why, I've come to see you. I've not seen you for so

long,' said Jill, and pity struck deeply into her as she saw the gasping, disintegrated old face. 'Come,' she said gently, putting her hand on Madame de Lamouderie's arm. 'Let me sit with you for a little while. And she guided her back into the drawing-room.

The old lady suffered herself to be placed in her chair and Jill seated herself beside her, neither of them uttering a word.

The thunder-cloud had now mounted to the zenith. All the window-panes showed its blackness above the tossing tree-tops and again a roll of thunder shook the air.

'Where is Marthe? Hark to the thunder. She is not in her room,' said the old lady, suddenly, and in an amazingly normal voice.

'She's gone down to the meadow to get the kid and its mother,' said Jill.

Madame de Lamouderie again stared at her. 'The kid?' she repeated. 'It is Blaise's kid. They will eat it at his first communion. Why not leave it where it is? — I would rather be drowned than eaten, would not you?'

'Well, I don't know,' said Jill, striving to speak naturally. 'Drowning must be very unpleasant, and one wouldn't know that one was being eaten.'

'No. But one would know when the knife was at one's throat,' said Madame de Lamouderie.

Jill was aware of a gathering sense of fear. The room was dark. Only a spot of red glowed on the hearth. Madame de Lamouderie's great gaze rested on her for a

moment and then turned slowly round the room. 'My portrait will never be finished now,' she said.

'Why do you say that?' Jill faltered. Her eyes followed Madame de Lamouderie's to the corner where Dick's canvas and easel stood. 'Dick hopes to go on with it, I think.'

'I do not think so,' said Madame de Lamouderie. 'He is finished with it — and with me. Show it to me.'

Jill got up and went to the canvas and turned it outward. And as she saw it she suppressed an exclamation of horror.

'Bring it nearer,' said Madame de Lamouderie.

'No, no,' said Jill, putting it back against the wall. 'It's still so rough. He doesn't mean you to see it yet.'

'I have already seen it. I have repeatedly seen it,' said Madame de Lamouderie. 'Bring it nearer — unless you wish to force me to get it for myself.'

Jill brought it to her then and held it for her to see and the old lady gazed at it in silence for a long time.

'He has made a devil of me, has he not?' she then said.

'It's not finished,' said Jill in a trembling voice. 'It isn't at all like you yet.'

'No? Is it not? I thank you. Yet it is so he sees me. It is so he sees me now, though only a little while ago — only three nights ago — he was with me here, and kind to me. Did you know that he came up here to see me? After he had stayed away until my very blood was grown thick with grief.'

'Yes, I knew.'

'He called me his Undine. He kissed me good-night,' said Madame de Lamouderie, her eyes on Jill. 'He kissed me here.' She touched her forehead. 'I told him of my childhood. We talked of life and death. Never have I been so near a human soul as I was near his on that night. He had forgotten her.'

'He had not forgotten her. No. No; — that's where you were mistaken,' said Jill in her shaken voice, still holding the portrait. 'He did not need to forget her to care for you. Oh, try to see that!'

But as she spoke Madame de Lamouderie's face grew livid with rage. 'When he remembers her, he thinks of no one! When he remembers her, he sees me as a devil! — Give it to me! — Give me that portrait he has made of me! Had he come to me and spat in my face he could not have told me more plainly what he felt for me! Give it to me! — There! And there! — So I answer him!' And seizing the heavy paper-knife that lay beside her, she dashed it through the canvas again and again.

Jill could not withstand her. She, too, felt that Graham had insulted Madame de Lamouderie.

'And now!' Panting, with haggard, burning eyes, the old woman flung the canvas aside. 'Now — where shall we look for him? Shall I tell you — you complaisant wife? He is on the island! Your husband is on the island with his saint! He is in the hut with his Saint Cecilia and it is she who now receives his kisses!'

'What do you mean? You must not say such things!' said Jill, blanched with disdain and anger.

'I mean what I say. Marthe Ludérac has taken him from us both. Three days ago he was my friend. Three days ago he was kind to me. To-day you have seen what he feels for me. What has happened in those three days? I will tell you. They have become lovers.' Madame de Lamouderie did not quail. Jill's anger steadied her. She eyed her with a narrow, steely look.

'No,' said Jill, after a moment. She, too, spoke quietly. 'I will tell you what has happened. He has found out that you lied to him. You lied to him to take him from her and for a little while he believed you. But then he saw her again and knew that what you said could not be true.'

The old lady, leaning back in her chair, listened, intently, and with a surprising calm. And as she sat, not speaking, looking over steadily at Jill, the intentness of her thought seemed to reconstruct her very features. Her lips composed themselves. Her eyes grew cold with calculation. Careful breaths dilated her nostrils. Something even of her old stateliness and power returned to her.

'So, she has talked with you, too. She guessed what was amiss and sought you out; — once more. My compliments to Mademoiselle Ludérac for her perspicacity! I dare not ask you to take my word for hers. Of that I am too well aware. You, too, no doubt, see me as your husband sees me. But I did not lie. You may ask the curé here if I lied. Marthe Ludérac had soldiers in her room at Bordeaux. He came to me as a

friend to warn me; to advise me to keep an eye on an unfortunate who had inherited criminal tendencies. He was informed of all the facts by the excellent women who keep the house where she lodged. She did not even trouble to contradict their accusation when they confronted her with it next morning.'

'The curé and his friends were mistaken,' said Jill. 'The soldier she took in had nowhere else to go. He was not her lover. And even if you believed that story — and I am sure that you did not — you lied to Dick. For you told him that she took lovers; that she was a woman who took lovers — for pay.'

Like the storm, the old lady's fury was rising again; but she controlled it. 'I repeated to your husband what I was told. I do not compute so carefully. I wished to save the unfortunate creature from his pursuit. I wished to save you. I did not act until all the signs showed me that the case was desperate. You do not know what passed between them, here in this room, while she read to me! I saw him steal his glances at her breast, her hands, her lips; — I saw her look back, under her eyelashes. They met on the island — no, you did not know — during your illness. I saw them walking there. Silent. Without one word. And his eyes passed over her like a flame, while she turned her head away. Poor ignorant child! — who think you know life and come to me with your reproofs! I saw from the first that you were blind and helpless in their experienced hands. Your husband is a libertine; — and if he has been faithful to you till now, you have

to thank only your freshness and youth. It was simple of you to imagine that he would remain untempted by a woman as seductive as Marthe Ludérac. For she knows what she is doing! She knows that to the libertine there is no seduction so great as that of purity!'

Jill sat silent. A crimson flush had dyed her face as the old woman told her tale; but, in the silence that followed, it sank slowly away, leaving her pallid under her sunburn. She felt a sickness in her veins. The very air seemed tainted, though even now her faith repelled the poison that trailed over the images of those she loved. She was hardly thinking of Madame de Lamouderie as she rose slowly to her feet. 'If it's true — they must be free,' she murmured.

'What is it you say?' asked the old woman.

'If they love each other, so much, they must be free. I must set them free if they belong to each other,' said Jill, looking out at the black sky.

'*Grand Dieu!*' cried Madame de Lamouderie, 'you will break your heart — you will wreck your life — for that little peasant! No! No! Be braver, my poor child! Just Heaven! — if I were in your place I would show you how a woman fights for her man and deals with her rivals! Wait. Be calm. Say nothing. I have made mistakes for you, — thinking that I could part them. I did not guess how much you already knew — how much you accepted. So, then. Accept it all. Let him have his fill of her. Smile and say no word and let your smile say to him: "So be it, *mon cher*. Take your little peasant. I do not feel her a rival!" There is no-

thing that so much disconcerts a man. He will soon tire of her then. And you will carry him off and punish him — as a woman knows how to punish; and some day, when he is sufficiently unhappy — forgive him. Do you see? — That is what you must do,' and the old lady's eye closed in a clinging leer as she offered her counsel.

'I'm sorry,' Jill muttered. 'You don't understand. I'm not like that.' She stood with her hand on the back of her chair, trying still to think. 'I must set them free, so that nothing shall be spoiled for them. They belong to each other; — but they are not lovers, yet.'

'They *are* lovers!' cried Madame de Lamouderie, passionately, though the leer still lingered like a smudge of mud across her face. 'I did not think it, either, until to-day. To-day I know. He was here this morning. To paint my portrait! — You have just seen how he painted my portrait this morning! — I am to be their pander, their go-between. That is his little plan. She sent for him to come to her in the garden and I watched them while they walked. I am not to be deceived by quiet. And all was not so quiet. Even though they saw me there, they could not control their fires. Everything — everything had passed between those two. I know the signs.'

Jill heard the thunder rolling and crackling overhead. She stood and listened to it. 'I must go now,' she said, when the reverberations had died away.

'You must go? So be it. I have indeed nothing to

offer you: and this is a house of ill-omen. You do well not to stop in it.'

'Good-bye, then,' said Jill. 'I'm sorry — I wish —'

She paused. She did not know what she wished; nothing that she could say to Madame de Lamouderie.— That she and Dick had gone away when they came to the Manoir a bare month ago, perhaps. He had been afraid. He had wanted to go. Poor Dick. She looked about the dusky room where Dick had first seen his fear, and when her eyes came back to Madame de Lamouderie's they found hers fixed upon her. The pity with which she had first seen her this afternoon smote upon her once again.

'How dark it is in here,' she said. 'Can I do anything for you? Light anything before I go?'

'No,' said Madame de Lamouderie. 'You can do nothing. I prefer to sit in darkness. Only — give me your hand.'

Jill, mastering the repulsion that mingled horribly with her pity, stretched out her hand to her, and the old lady, putting both of hers upon it, held it closely, looking up at her with a devouring gaze. 'It is you I have loved,' she said in a hoarse whisper. 'You only. Not your husband. That was an old woman's caprice. A trick, such as our wretched senses may still play on us at eighty. You are worth ten of him. It is you I love. Do you understand?'

Jill, sickening, tried to draw away her hand, but, holding it fiercely now, Madame de Lamouderie staggered to her feet. 'It was all for you. All! All! —

Do you understand? I risked his hatred for your sake! I knew that it was to risk his hatred! Better that than to share him with that hypocrite! — that parasite! — that low-born peasant girl! — No! No! Stay! Listen to me yet! It was for your sake! I could not bear to see you sacrificed to such a one!'

'Perhaps you believe that,' Jill muttered, pulling away her hand. 'Try not to think about it now. You've been through too much. You are not yourself. Try to rest, and forget all this for a time, if you can.'

'Forget it!' screamed the old woman suddenly, while her face suffered a horrible distortion. 'Forget what he has made me suffer! Only in my grave shall I forget it! Would God that I were there!' And as she uttered the cry she raised her arms above her head and clasped them over her eyes, and Jill, horrified, spellbound, heard that she sobbed savagely.

'Oh — don't. Don't. I beg of you. Try to be quiet.' Jill put out her hand to her, but drew it back. Madame de Lamouderie filled her with fear. She was horrible to see and hear. She stood there, her arms crossed before her face, her hands clutching at her white head behind.

'He kissed me! He loved me! All was well with us at last! He had forgotten her at last!' she cried. '*Qu'elle soit maudite! Qu'elle soit maudite!*'

Casting a glance of terror upon her, Jill fled from the room.

CHAPTER XXVIII

By the Cemetery Wall

THE storm had burst over the whole country-side. The forest groaned and bowed under the tempest. The thunder rolled and the lightning flashed in a spectral sky. Jill walked in the midst of it, her head erect, her eyes fixed before her on the seething road, and as she found herself thus exposed to the desperate elements she was quieted and strengthened. She seemed to be driving her ambulance again along a road in the firing-line, hearing the crash of artillery and seeing the flame of bursting shells, and as she had used to say to herself then, while the bullets spattered about her on the road, so she now heard herself saying, 'Steady, old girl; steady.'

Everything was over for her. Everything had come to an end. That was like death. And death came to everyone, sooner or later. Facing death had been one of the easiest things to learn in the war. Everybody learned it. It was easier than putting on wet boots in the morning or drinking tea made with condensed milk. One might flinch and sicken inwardly; but one held up one's head and managed to smile. That was what she must do now.

How the rain boiled up about her feet from the disintegrated road! The stones were loosened by the cataracts of water that poured down its cracks and

gullies and the rosy-white of the lightning dazzled her eyes as it glared incessantly from the sky. It had always been a rather glorious thing to be out in a great storm; a purifying thing. These torrents, this tempest, laved away the taint and sickness of the reptile-house from which she had come. Wretched old woman. Horrible. Piteous. — No; — don't think of her.

This might seem worse than dying, but that was because it was so full of pictures. Death always seemed just emptiness, and that was because you had to leave everything when you died. Whereas, in this, everything was leaving you. In death you lay down and forgot; in this, you stood up and remembered. It was because of the memories that Madame de Lamouderie had flung her arms up in that horrible way and clutched at her head behind. She did not know how to stand still. But if one were not careful, one might be like that oneself. One might break down and rave and scream. No; no. No pictures. No pictures of Dick's head on her breast at night — taking refuge. No pictures of Marthe Ludérac walking with him in the garden; so still.

The cemetery wall was before her now and the chestnut branches dashed themselves against it above Madame Ludérac's grave. The bristling tin tubs glittered against the black as the lightning struck across them. Jill glanced, and turned her eyes away. Round the corner the woodland road ran down into the *grande route*. It would be better when she was out

upon the *grande route*, all the river, all the sky before her. Suddenly, below her, coming round the wall, she saw Marthe Ludérac.

If Marthe had been exhausted that morning, what was she now? She was bowed against the blast; half obliterated by the rain. A kid tottered, bleating, after her, and as she came into view she stopped and turned to it with a gesture of dogged tenderness, picked it up, toiled on with it for a little way, then set it down again. Its weight was beyond her strength.

Jill, motionless, watched her staggering up the stony road, and as she approached, a stillness, a whiteness, like that of the antechamber of death, fell upon her.

They were near each other, they were only a few yards apart, when Marthe lifted her face and saw Jill standing in the road above her. She stopped still, and, through the tempest, they looked at each other. Then Jill opened her arms and she came into them. She laid her arms on Jill's shoulders and bent her head upon her breast. The rain was like a heavy shroud enfolding them.

'Marthe, Marthe,' Jill whispered. 'Nothing is changed between us.'

Nothing was changed. She knew that now. Marthe's face, holy and beautiful, had banished for ever the dreadful darkness. It was as if they had passed through death together and reached a place where no word need be said; no question asked. And as they stood thus embraced, an experience transcend-

ing any she had ever known came to Jill. Her love for Marthe Ludérac flamed up and enfolded them both, and enfolded Dick, and all her being was filled with rapture. She was filled with life from head to foot; and life was love, only love; and this bliss came to her because she loved Marthe Ludérac and because Marthe was holy; though it seemed only a shattered, helpless woman she held, beaten beyond all will or feeling.

'Don't cry, darling,' she heard herself say; from far away, and after how long a time she did not know. For Marthe was sobbing on her breast. Under the chestnuts, Jill saw that they might find a little shelter. The form she held was wet through and through; Marthe's hair streamed rivers of rain into her bosom. She drew her beneath the boughs, and they leaned against the cemetery wall. The kid lay down, creeping closely to their feet.

'Jill,' whispered Marthe, 'let me tell you this. I have been faithful to you. I could not deny that I loved him. But not one word, not one look of tenderness has he had from me.'

'Oh, poor Dick!' half sighed, half smiled Jill. Paradise was a childlike place. One could smile in paradise.

But, hearing these words from her friend, Marthe Ludérac lifted her ravaged face and gazed at her.

'You must have made him very miserable, Marthe,' said Jill, gently regarding her. 'I'm afraid I couldn't have kept that up with a man I loved.'

'But, Jill — you do not understand.' Marthe's

sunken eyes dwelt on her. 'I have seen him when you did not know. It was not only when you sent him to me on the island. I have seen him at the Manoir; — at night, once; alone. And this morning, after you and I were in the woods — he came. And we were together in the garden; we walked there together, for a long time.'

'Yes, I know. I wanted you to see him. You remember what I said this morning, Marthe; even this morning, when I did not understand as I do now. I knew that you and he must see each other. I knew that everything must come quite clear between you, when you saw each other.'

'Quite clear?' A look of incomprehension drew Marthe's brows to a knot of suffering.

'Marthe, my darling, you and Dick belong to each other. That's what's clear now — to all of us. You and he are never going to part,' said Jill.

All this time Marthe had rested upon Jill's shoulders while they leaned against the wall; now she drew her arms away. 'What do you mean?' she asked.

'What I say, Marthe. I am going to set Dick free,' said Jill.

As she heard the words, Marthe's face took on a look of terror. 'You believe that I am going to take your husband from you?'

'But, Marthe — you *have* taken him from me,' Jill said, oddly grimacing so that her tears should not flow down. 'Or, rather — for you've done nothing — he's taken himself from me and given himself to you.'

'No,' said Marthe after a moment, intently thinking. 'No. It is not so. He will always love you. You will always be his loved wife.'

'Marthe, I understand.' Jill still grimaced. 'No good going into that. He loves me. But it's you he wants.'

'Such wants pass.'

'Not Dick's for you. When he's with you he's in heaven. That's what it comes to. You'll never make him forget his want of heaven.'

'No! It is not heaven! With you it is heaven; — not with me! It is wrong with me!' cried Marthe Ludérac, looking fiercely about her, up at the cemetery wall, out at the forest, as though she sought some escape from the anguish of her thought. 'He is wrong — always wrong — when he is with me! Let him go! Let him forget me! Let it be like a bad dream to you both! It is a bad dream. It is a spell that has fallen upon him, and upon me.'

'No! No! No, Marthe,' said Jill in a trembling voice, but with a depth of conviction against which the other's passion spent itself in vain. 'It only seems like that; — because I am there between you; — and because you are human, and want each other, in every way. If I were not there, if you belonged to him — it would all be beautiful. And it shall be. Do you think I can keep Dick now, after what I've seen? Dick and I have loved each other; we love each other still; but it's nothing, nothing, to what he feels for you. Some people love when they're young and afterwards they

are kind to each other. It's a habit; and the kindness keeps them together. But with you and Dick age will make no difference. I see it all. When you are an old, old woman, you would only have to hold out your hand to him, and he would follow you. He is yours for ever and ever. If you were dead and he never saw you again, it would make no difference. As long as he could remember you — he would still be yours.'

Marthe Ludérac closed her eyes. She leaned against the wall and her head drooped. 'I cannot talk,' she muttered. 'What you say is a romance — It is not true. But I cannot talk any longer. I am too tired —'

'No, we won't talk now,' Jill murmured, sustaining and enfolding her. 'Listen, my darling Marthe. You can't go back to the Manoir. You are to come with me, to Buissac. I'll help you. I'll carry the kid. You shall be quietly with me at the Ecu d'Or. You shall not see Dick until you feel you care to. I'll see him. I'll explain everything to him. I will take care of you.'

Helpless within her arms, Marthe's head hung against her breast. She seemed almost fainting; but Jill heard the word she muttered: 'Impossible. Impossible.'

'It's not impossible. It's the only way. You shan't go back to that horrible old woman. She'll kill you. I'm not going to argue with you. I'm not going to torment you. You are only coming with me, your friend, to be taken care of. Do you see? Marthe — my darling — don't set yourself against what must be.'

For Marthe was pushing her away, raising her head again, turning from her. 'Never; never; never,' she said, with a dulled yet passionate utterance. She stood pressing her hand against Jill's breast, keeping her at arm's length, and she fixed her sunken eyes upon the upland road as if measuring her strength against its steepness and the distance to her home. 'Never,' she repeated yet again, and with returning force apparent in her voice and mien. 'What you ask of me would kill me. I am better now. I am rested. I can go alone. Later; — to-morrow, perhaps, I will see you. And I will see him. I have promised him that we shall meet once more. Good-bye.'

'But, Marthe.' Jill clung to her arm. 'She's mad. I've just seen her, and she's mad. I'm afraid for you.'

Marthe had passed out into the road, and Jill, carrying the kid, still held her by the arm, nearly weeping.

'That is a folly, dear Jill,' said Marthe. She took the kid into her arms. 'She is very quiet with me, that poor old woman; docile, obedient. And Joseph is there, who understands, and would protect me. I shall not see her again to-day. See, my kid is rested, too; it can go beside me quite well now, for the little way. I took it and its mother to the meadow early this morning and only remembered when the storm came that they were still there. When I found them, the mother had been killed by a fallen tree; the tree beside the cabin had been struck. The kid was lying close beside her; only think how pitiful. I shall buy it from Julie now. I will not part from it. Yes, my little one; one more

effort and you shall have hot milk and a warm corner by the fire where you can sleep. And Joseph will do as much for me! Now; do you see, Jill, how calm and reasonable I am? There is nothing to fear for me. And you, too, will be reasonable, will you not? And to-morrow we will see each other. Yes; we will meet once more; — if indeed you feel that is best, when to-morrow comes.'

Jill could not find one word to say. Marthe had escaped from her. She was strong again, with a strange, resourceful strength; with an almost maternal authority and austerity, that counted every moment, calculated every word and glance, while she stooped to pat her kid and turned her eyes on Jill, appraising her submission.

'Good-bye, then,' said Jill. She submitted. She saw herself helpless, as always, before Marthe Ludérac. But she had begun to cry and the tears at last were streaming down her face.

Marthe Ludérac stood there in the storm and looked at her intently for a moment. 'My loved Jill,' she said.

She took Jill's hand in hers and held it against her cheek.

'My loved Jill,' she repeated, gazing into Jill's eyes with a deep, radiant look. 'We shall never forget each other,' she said.

Then, turning away, she walked rapidly up the road towards the Manoir, supernaturally sustained, it seemed to Jill, who watched her until a turning hid her from sight.

CHAPTER XXIX

The Dream

HOUR after hour, all the hot hours of early afternoon, all the hours of storm, Richard Graham lay sleeping. It was a deep, but not a dreamless sleep, and the dream was sweet. First he was a little boy, sleeping beside his Scotch Nannie. His head was on her shoulder and her arms enfolded his small body. He had been ill, perhaps; or unhappy; for a lassitude, like that after fever or weeping, was on him; and no thought was in his mind; only the deep, calm assurance of rest. Then it was in Jill's arms that he slept; it was always the same dream, and he was always sleeping, yet aware. But the arms that held him were now Jill's and the sense of security, of danger escaped, was deeper than before. And then he lay in the arms of Marthe Ludérac. He knew that the change had come, yet it gave him no surprise. Perhaps from the beginning he had known that this was to be the final bliss, if bliss it could be called when it was so quiet. He lay beside Marthe Ludérac and her arms enfolded him, and his her; and they were one. All fever, all desire, was satisfied; he knew no want. The barriers that life had placed between them had vanished; it was in the grave, or in a field of paradise, that they lay; contented; united; yet uncommunicating. 'This, then, was what I needed,' was the dim thought drifting through his

mind. Time was abolished; want was abolished. Everything was still; and everything was full of light. Together they sank into unconsciousness.

When he opened his eyes and saw Jill standing before him, he looked at her quietly for a long moment while the dream slid in upon itself, backward, and Jill, and his Nannie, were as real as Marthe had been. There was no shock or loss. It was all one. Then, in a sudden surprise, he sprang to his feet. Behind Jill was Amélie, with a steaming *broc* in her hand.

'Good God, Jill — what has happened!' he said, but the dream was about him and he smiled at her.

'The car broke down. I walked back in the rain. That's all.' Jill, too, smiled at him. 'Put the water in the dressing-room, Amélie.'

Graham turned his eyes on the window. 'But it's thunder I hear. It's a great storm. Have you been out in this storm? Have I slept all day?'

'Nearly all day,' said Jill. She walked towards the dressing-room, Amélie following her.

'But — Jill — you're drowned!' he cried.

'Ah — it is a wonder indeed that Madame is not drowned — in this flood!' Amélie set down the *broc* for a moment to enlighten him. 'Never has there been such a flood in Buissac. Already the poor people are driving their cattle into the town and the corpse of a cow passed along the river a little while ago.' Amélie was tragic and exhilarated.

Jill had fallen on a chair in the dressing-room, and, after looking at her for a moment, Graham knelt down

before her and began to take off her sodden shoes. 'Get a glass of hot cognac and water — will you, Amélie,' he said, over his shoulder, and Amélie, crying out that it was precisely what Madame Michon had advised, sped away on the behest.

Graham, deftly, quietly, poured out the water and chafed Jill's icy feet as he put them into the basin. He often bathed Jill's feet for her, and never failed to remark on their beauty. But to-day he said nothing. And she suffered his ministrations in silence.

Amélie brought the cognac and she drank it obediently, and then, when the feet were dried,

'Now,' she said, 'I'm going to sluice down with hot water and go to bed.'

Dick had risen and was looking at her. 'The best thing you can do. A long sleep is what you need. Like mine.' Still he looked at her. 'Such dreams, Jill; — such strange long dreams I've had.'

She saw from his eyes that his dream was still about him and seeing it she felt again the sense of an unearthly radiance that had come to her on the mountain road. She and Dick were suddenly near together; almost as near as she and Marthe had been. They were friends in a deep, final sense that made of the nearness of marriage a clumsy, inadequate device. They were smiling at each other and tender, foolish thoughts came to her mind. 'Not too strange I hope,' she said. 'What would your horrid Freud make of them?'

'He's welcome to make what he likes. — Are you going to sleep in here?' There was the little bed in the

dressing-room that Graham had slept in during her illness.

'Yes. In here. So that you shan't disturb me.'

'You'll have some dinner first?'

'Yes. A little dinner, on a tray. — Amélie knows.'

'I see. — And then you'll sleep?'

'Yes. Don't come in to see. I'll be sound very soon.'

'And to-morrow?'

'To-morrow we can talk, Dick,' said Jill.

She smiled at him and she saw, as he stood in the door, gazing at her gravely, that he measured the immense distances that had come between them. They were near as never before in their lives; yet all life now divided them. He would not kiss her good-night. No. She saw that he would not. The radiance was there, about them both, and it still sustained her; but when he had softly closed the door, Jill, for one black moment, gasped on a rising surge of tears; bit them down, fought and mastered them. No; no; no; — she would not think. The next thing to do was to sleep. And she undressed rapidly.

CHAPTER XXX

The Parting

BUT Jill did not sleep as Graham had slept. The rain poured on all night and it seemed to her that she heard it all night long, though she drifted into intervals of unconsciousness. Dick heard it, too, for she saw the crack of light under his door while he walked about and opened or shut his windows. She could do nothing for Dick now. She wondered if Marthe were lying awake, listening to the rain. And the terrible old lady, what were her thoughts? All three thinking of Dick. How strange it was! How absurd! What did it mean? Was it all a fevered, tumultuous dream, this love that so tormented and severed them? Why could they not all love each other, and Dick, and be happy in the radiance of unity? But no; the night wore on and her pulses, beating in heavy, lonely sorrow, told her that while one was enmeshed in personal life such unity could only come to one in moments that transcended and lifted one above it. It was the fire of life that burned in one, and to escape into its light was to cross from one order of being to another. But it was not the fire she felt, now, or the light; only the slow, sick pulse of sorrow.

She fell asleep at dawn and slept until Amélie knocked at her door with her breakfast tray.

'Ah — *c'est un véritable déluge, Madame,*' said Amélie,

entering with a beaming face. 'The roads are flooded. The children cannot go to school. *Viens, Germaine, et dis bonjour à Madame.*'

Germaine, though chocolates had passed between her and Jill, did not say good-morning, but her small, square face, topped by its cockade of red ribbon, peered round at the pretty lady from behind her mother's skirt.

Dick looked in while Amélie was there and smiled at her and asked her how she had slept. She felt that he had seized the opportunity so that they should not be alone. His face looked strange and new. He was much older. She suddenly saw what he would be like when he was an old man. She saw what his father, perhaps his grandfather, had looked like. Something bare, elemental, atavistic, was revealed in his face.

'I'm breakfasting downstairs,' he said, 'so that I can watch the river. It's magnificent. When will you get up?'

'As soon as I've had my breakfast.'

'And come down to the *salon?*'

'Yes.'

Dick looked at her, humbly, intently. He was afraid of her; afraid for her. Before his strange, aged, humble eyes, Jill's eyes fell. She could do nothing for Dick. She would not be able to hide from him how he must make her suffer. She took up her roll and buttered it, mechanically, and poured out her coffee, while Amélie, watching the devoted pair with fond complacency, still loitered in the door, turning her head to rebuke

Germaine who sported shrilly in the corridor: '*Tais-toi, Germaine. Tu auras une claque si tu cries comme celà!*'

'All right, then,' Dick muttered. 'I'll be waiting.' He closed his door.

'Did Madame see Madame la comtesse last night?' Amélie then inquired.

'Yes. Why?' Jill looked up, startled.

'The old lady seems to have lost her wits,' said Amélie, while a deeper pleasure shone from her face. 'Jean, the baker's boy, drove down from Mérinac last night and saw her in the forest, running down the road, bareheaded; not even a cloak upon her in the storm. Mademoiselle Ludérac and Monsieur Trumier came after her and led her back to the Manoir.'

'Good Heavens!' said Jill, to herself, though she spoke aloud. She was thinking of this end to Marthe's day.

Amélie looked at her consideringly and ventured further.

'*Elle est toquée*,' she placed a finger on her forehead. 'Jean heard her screaming out the name of Monsieur and that she must go to him; — that she had something to say to him; a confession to make; and that he would forgive her. Jean thinks that Mademoiselle Ludérac promised her that she should see him. Only so would she consent to be led away at last. Ah — it is a sad life for that young person, is it not, Madame? — First the mad mother and then the mad friend.'

'If only she *were* mad. That would be a comfort,' Jill thought. Aloud she said; 'Mademoiselle Ludérac

is a saint, Amélie. But the old lady isn't mad. She's had a misunderstanding with Monsieur and it makes her miserable. He will see her, as Mademoiselle Ludérac promised. And it will be all right. It's dreadfully sad when old people like that are so unhappy.'

'Ah, yes, it is a sad thing, when one is over eighty, to be capable of such attachments,' Amélie observed. 'There is an age for everything, *n'est-ce-pas*, Madame?'

But to this Jill found it more convenient to make no reply.

She dressed quickly, turning her eyes from her mirror to the desolate scene outside. The livid river had risen to the level of the road and flooded in upon it through openings in the wall. She fixed her mind upon the flood.

In the *salon*, Dick had lighted the fire and stood at the window looking out, and when he turned and saw her he said nothing.

She fumbled in her pockets for her cigarettes. She had left her case upstairs, and Dick offered her his, struck a match and lighted her cigarette for her, while she sank onto the sofa.

Half closing her eyes, she drew in a breath of smoke. The cigarette affected her as a raft they both clung to. But they must plunge. And she felt the water close over her head as she said, her eyes on the fire, 'Dick — I know everything.'

He had stood looking at her with the lighted match in his fingers, and he shook it out and tossed it into the fire, and sat down on the edge of the table, folding his arms.

'I was with Marthe, twice, yesterday,' Jill went on. 'We were both too tired. I couldn't persuade her. We had to leave it. But to-day you must see her and make her understand that you and she must go away together.'

Dick loomed up there between her and the window, tall, dark, still, with his folded arms. 'Leaving you?' was what he said at last.

'I'll be going, too,' said Jill, pausing for a moment to think. 'In another direction. It's all really simple, isn't it? — when people understand each other, and love each other.'

'Simple, do you call it? Bringing our marriage to an end?'

It was not a case for retort. He did not mean it like that. Jill understood. 'We couldn't, of course; if it had been anything small, or usual. I mean — if you'd been unfaithful, in the usual way, with the usual sort of person — I'd have forgiven you, of course. I shouldn't have dreamed of our parting. But it's not a case for forgiveness, now. It has nothing to do with forgiveness. Only for understanding. And I do understand.'

'I don't quite make out how you do,' Dick muttered, taking a tighter grasp of his arms and turning his head to look down at the fire.

'How I understand as I do, you mean? — Because of Marthe, of course,' said Jill. 'After all' — and she could not repress a curious little smile, half sweetness, half bitterness — 'I loved her before you did.'

'Did you? I wonder,' Dick murmured, his eyes on the fire.

'Well, I *knew* I loved her before you did,' Jill amended, gently. And this Dick, apparently, accepted.

'There's nothing left for us to go on with, is there?' Jill continued. 'We care for each other, just as much as ever, no doubt. But that's not enough, now. You've never cared for anybody as you do for Marthe. And you can't go on without her. Or she without you, for that matter; though she thinks she can.'

Dick seemed to ponder, his eyes still on the fire. He brought them to her as he said at last; 'But how can I go on without *you?*'

And at that, after a moment, Jill got up and walked away to the window.

But Dick followed her. He came behind her and laid his hands on her shoulders and turned her round so that he looked down into her eyes. 'How could you go on without me, Jill?' he asked.

If she allowed her thoughts to rest for one moment on her own shipwreck, Jill knew that her tears must gush forth; and if she wept Dick's arms would go round her. She yearned for his arms; but they would sear her flesh. She held her eyes widely open while she looked up at him, a wide, tragic gaze from the eyes so framed for mirth, and she asked in her turn: 'But how could I go on *with* you, Dick?'

'You've never meant so much to me,' he said, looking down into those wide eyes. 'I've never loved you so much.'

'Yes,' she nodded; she even tried to smile. 'I believe that. But it doesn't really help us. Because you love her more than you thought you could love anybody. That's what I said to her, yesterday, Dick. When you're with her you're in heaven.'

'But it helps us in this way,' said Graham. He would not pause for what she had said to Marthe. 'It makes it possible for us to go on together, in spite of everything. Not one woman in a thousand could stand it; but you are the one woman who could. Anyone else but you would tear herself — and me — to pieces; but you'd understand; as you do. You'd understand everything. And when I came back, you would have pity and help me to go on without her.'

'When you say, "came back," do you mean came back from her?' Jill gazed up at him, still held by him. 'Do you mean that you and Marthe would go away together and then that you'd leave her?'

'She won't come away,' said Graham. 'I asked her — yesterday morning. Not only did she refuse; but she showed me why it was impossible. She showed me that I couldn't leave you. So what I asked of her then was that we should be lovers. And that's what I ask of you. That you should remain my wife, while she becomes my mistress.'

At that Jill closed her eyes. 'It was what the old woman said.'

'Madame de Lamouderie? What did she say?'

'That you were lovers; already. I knew it wasn't true. But I thought it wasn't true of you, as well as of her.'

'She said that, did she? Cursed old witch. Well, her lies are always half truths, I expect. I should have been Marthe's lover now, Jill, if she would have taken me.'

Jill was leaning away from him, with shut eyes, but fiercely, almost savagely, while he put his truths before her, he held her still and made her see it all; all that she had lost; yet all she gained in the strange triumph of such sincerity.

'Which would you rather, Jill; give me up; let me go; — or have us lovers? The truth, the real truth, that she sees as clearly as I do — more clearly — is that you are my wife and she and I lovers. It's because it's the truth that I feel I may make her accept it. I could never make her accept your place.'

'But I haven't got any place.' Jill freed herself at last, and his hands fell from her as he saw that there was no more for him to say. 'I'm your friend. But I'm not your wife. That's the truth you must make her see. She sees the other because she's French. But I'm English. I'm not a wife if my husband loves somebody else more than he loves me. Oh, I'm not unkind, Dick; — you know I'm not. It's only truth. And how could I bear it, for Marthe, that she should be your mistress? That you should love her — and leave her? I couldn't bear it. I must go. To-day. When she hears that I have gone, she will see what it means to me. She'll see that to myself I'm not a wife any longer. A wife must be everything. She must be home; — but she must be heaven, too.'

Graham stood near the window, where she had left

him, and she had moved back as she spoke, till she reached the door. Her hand was on the latch now, as if indeed she was leaving him for ever. He eyed her from across the room. 'You can't go to-day,' he said. 'The car's broken down.'

Jill leaned back against the door and a look of bewilderment crossed her face.

'The car's broken,' Graham repeated, heavily. 'And everything's flooded.'

'To-morrow, then,' Jill muttered.

'To-morrow? Well; we'll see.' He eyed her strangely. 'You'd have to accept it, Jill, you know.'

'Accept what?'

'If she won't consent to come with me; but if she will consent to love me. You'd have to accept it; if she did.'

There drifted across Jill's mind the memory of a phrase that she had heard that morning; words that Marthe had spoken to her in the wood — was it only that morning when it seemed years ago? — 'Love need not be light to know itself measured. What is more grave than to be doomed to part?' Even Dick did not know Marthe as she did. Even Dick did not understand the doom that rested upon Marthe. And this was why she had come to Buissac; this was why she had not turned away from the spellbound house. As if in a dream, she saw it all and felt herself armed with the power of the embracing vision.

'I will never accept it,' she said. 'Never; for Marthe. You must belong to each other — for life. You must make her happy. You must live for her; not only love

her. Don't worry about me, Dick. I shall be happy again — and she's never been happy. You'll have everything to make up to her. You can't only be her lover. Do you see?'

He did see, at last. He could never himself have found strength to put Jill out. She put herself out. He could never have found the strength with which to beat down Marthe's resistance. Jill gave her to him. Never had he and Jill been so near as in this moment when he saw at last, clearly, that they must part.

CHAPTER XXXI

The Empty House

IT was late afternoon and at the Manoir door Graham had rung three times. The dark house, cloaked with rain, loomed above him, its walls filled with the furtive patterings of falling drops, like the running feet of mice. Behind him the wet branches of the sycamores sighed in the melancholy wind. There was no other sound; but, as he stood there, his foreboding Scotch blood alert and listening, old Médor stumbled round the corner of the house and paused, as Marthe Ludérac had paused, so long ago, and, fixing his fading eyes upon him, he lifted his nose and uttered a low howl. Hastily, angrily, at that, Graham turned the handle of the door and found it yield. The chill, high hall was before him and from the high window, above the stair, a pallid light fell down upon it.

Graham stood and looked; and listened to the stillness. He was alone as he had never been alone. Jill had not yet left him; but she had found a car and it was to take her that night to Mérinac, where she would catch the Paris train. It might be that he and Jill would never meet again. He had come to tell Marthe Ludérac that she was his wife no longer.

And as he stood in the silent house the real Marthe Ludérac seemed further from him than the Marthe of his dream.

He remembered that window. How curiously it had affected him when he first saw it. Should he now, suddenly, see Marthe appear at the turning of the stair? Or would it be the demented figure of Madame de Lamouderie? Or a figure in black, with a patch over its eye? Yes. This house had always terrified him. He knew that now. Had there not been terror, from the first, in his love for Marthe Ludérac? Had he not felt her, from the first, a ghost? — a corpse? What was he doing, standing here in this house of death? What had he come to seek? Where was Jill? — and life? — safe, sweet life?

He mastered the sickness of his blood. He went forward and opened the drawing-room door. The room was empty. The shrouded harp stood in the recess. His easel leaned in its place and he noted the gashed canvas, though he did not move forward to examine its destruction. But by the fire the footstool had been pushed away from the *bergère* and on the little table was the white earthenware basin that had been so inopportunely visible when he and Jill had first found the old lady; on a day of ill-omen. Madame de Lamouderie had been there, then; and recently.

He went outside and stood. 'Joseph!' he called. Dismally the walls and corridors of the old house answered his call, echoing back its challenge impotently. And as he heard the echo and the silence, another fear smote upon him; a natural, not a supernatural fear. Where was Marthe, then?

He went up the stair. He found the green baize

door; and it led him to the old woman's room. It was empty; well ordered for the day. There stood the pink dressing-table and there the bed, all canopied in pink. In a corner was an important *prie-dieu*, mahogany and worn green velvet, a crucifix above it; and on the opposite wall hung a large engraving of a picture popular in the eighties, '*Enfin Seuls!*' showing a draped and padded drawing-room in which two fashionable lovers clasped each other. Hideous rubbish it was; just such a picture as Madame de Lamouderie would have hanging opposite the crucifix; yet the element of sincerity in the lovers' absorption transcended the frippery, and Graham felt his heart stabbed to a living love once more by the sight of that embrace. He turned away. He followed the long passage. The door yielded to his hand, as it had yielded on the moonlit night. He stood on the threshold of Marthe's room, as he had stood once before, and it was as empty as if she were dead.

Poor, sad, desolate little room, without a trace of magic now, the window opening on the rainy sky. Yet it had signs of the happier past of childhood. On the bed was a faded satin eiderdown; on the chest of drawers a little toilet-set of silver, such as a child might receive on a splendid birthday, carefully laid out; and was that not, in the corner, sitting in its little chair, a faded, smiling, ancient doll? Yes; through all these years of tragedy she had kept her doll to comfort her. Graham's heart almost broke as he looked at it.

'You can't only be her lover.' Those words of Jill's came back to him. He had only been her lover as yet. As he looked at the piteous room, at the smiling doll, a new element came into his love, and into his life. He was unworthy; unworthy; how deeply unworthy — of Jill, and of Marthe. What should he ever do to repay? — to atone? How lift himself to the level where he could be to Marthe what Jill's love and sacrifice demanded of him? Tears came into his fierce dark eyes. He could have fallen on his knees beside the bed and prayed to be purified and strengthened.

A mewing sound drifted down the corridor, and turning he saw the old white-and-grey cat of Jill's first encounter with Marthe Ludérac. He remembered its story as he saw it, and remembered that he had seen it once before. It walked with a jerky gait, its mutilated leg turning in at every step. It was not affected by the loneliness as Médor had been. It looked quietly up at him, accepting his presence, and tilted itself against his leg as it passed into the room and went to sniff at the black sateen apron lying thrown down upon a chair. Contemplating the emptiness, it stood waving its tail tranquilly from side to side for some moments and then, looking up at Graham again, it mewed once more, as if in interrogation. Graham picked it up tenderly.

He went down the corridor, holding the cat, and back to the stairs. The front door opened as he descended them and on the landing he looked down at the upturned face of Joseph; — Joseph wearing a

strange little bowler hat of an obsolete shape. The relief of seeing him was exquisite.

Joseph was agitated, too much agitated to express any surprise or displeasure. 'Is Monsieur looking for Madame la comtesse?' he asked.

'Yes. And for Mademoiselle Ludérac,' said Graham.

'Mademoiselle has gone out to seek her kid. It has escaped, or been taken away. She went to give it its evening milk in the shed; — and found it gone. But the rope, too, was gone, so that we think the boy from the cottage may have come to fetch it.'

Relief, delicious, ecstatic, was flooding Graham's heart. He stood above Joseph, the cat in his arms, and questioned him. 'Why should the boy come for it — if it's Mademoiselle's?'

'Ah; Mademoiselle Marthe intends to buy it now. She will give him two fowls, for his first communion feast, in place of it, as well as its price, to his mother; but Blaise will have set his heart on roast kid.'

'Will he! — The little ogre!'

'Ah, roast kid is an excellent dish, Monsieur,' said Joseph, in his flat, impartial tones. 'And if the kid is not eaten, the fowls will be.'

'That's true enough!' laughed Graham, his sardonic humour gratified by Joseph's realism. 'But since Mademoiselle wants it to live, that's all that need concern us, isn't it? — I must go and help her find it; at once.'

'Ah, but it is Madame la comtesse who is lost now!' said Joseph, and with something of impatience for a gaiety he must feel misplaced, and, indeed, Graham

himself felt it misplaced, as he looked into Joseph's face. 'It is Madame la comtesse who will trouble Mademoiselle more than the kid. She is gone. She is disappeared. I went to look at the fire, when Mademoiselle had left me, and she was not there. Only an hour before I had taken her in her *panade;* but she had not eaten it; the bowl was untouched. Madame la comtesse is not well. Her mind seems to be affected. Mademoiselle is much alarmed for her. And what I now think is that she may have run down to Buissac to find Monsieur. She hoped, I think, to see him last night.'

'I see.' Graham reflected. 'Yes. That's probable. Though I've just come from Buissac and didn't meet her on the road.'

Joseph reflected, observing with a thoughtful eye Graham's hand as it unconsciously caressed the head of the cat. 'She will have gone through the forest then. Will Monsieur not search for her? — and bring her back?'

'But what of Mademoiselle? It's her I've come to see.'

'She will not have gone far,' said Joseph coldly, though Graham felt that Joseph was less cold than might have been expected. 'She will first have gone down to the cottage, to see if the kid is there. If it is not, she may stay there for a little while with Madame Scannin, who is ill. She often visits her. If the kid has run away, it is useless to look for it in this storm.'

'It's most unlikely to have run away, isn't it?'

'Most unlikely. That is what Mademoiselle thinks. She thinks that it is Blaise.'

'Well; I'll go down to Buissac, then.' Graham placed the cat in Joseph's arms as he spoke. 'But I'll go to the cottage first, and tell Mademoiselle that I will bring the old lady back, if I can find her. How's that? — Joseph,' said Graham suddenly, looking down into the old man's shrinking eyes; 'you may trust me.'

'Trust you, Monsieur?' Joseph eyed him askew.

'Yes. You may trust me and Madame Graham. We want the same thing for Mademoiselle.'

'You cannot take her from Buissac. You cannot take her from France,' said Joseph in a low, concentrated voice. 'She remains with me. I have cared for her since she was a child. I have known her family from before her birth. It would kill her to take her away.'

'No; no; no; — it wouldn't kill her,' said Graham, also speaking in a low voice and as if to an equal. 'And you shall not be left. Trust me. That is all. If you could understand what I feel for her, even you would be satisfied.'

'You cannot understand her,' said Joseph. 'You are a stranger.'

Graham stood there in the hall, and for a moment, as he looked at Joseph, another fear flickered in his heart. Was Joseph right? What was the life he could give Marthe Ludérac? Would he take her from the darkness that she knew into another, a strange darkness?

Was she not rooted here as deeply as the chestnut-trees that grew above her mother's grave? Then he remembered Jill. Jill believed that he could make up to Marthe — for everything. Jill, who loved Marthe, had left her to him.

'You must trust me, Joseph,' he said. 'I am not a stranger. I do understand her. If they trust me — so must you.'

Joseph, making no reply, stood in the doorway and watched him pass out, under the silent bell.

He did not knock when he reached the cottage. He pushed open the door and found himself in the one room of the place, with floor of hard-beaten earth, wide fireplace, where a pot hung from a chain above a faltering fire, and stately bed in a corner. From the pillow the white face of a peasant woman turned to survey him in astonishment. A small boy sat before the fire.

'Have you seen Mademoiselle Ludérac?' Graham asked.

The little boy, staring with all his eyes, remained speechless, but the woman said: 'Mademoiselle was here a little while ago. We have no news of the kid. The mother has been killed by the lightning. Heaven pray that no evil has befallen the kid. Mademoiselle has promised to buy it from us.'

'Where has she gone, then? Where is she?' cried Graham. 'She's not looking for it on such a day!'

'But Mademoiselle would be well capable of looking for it — with her love of dumb things. I cannot tell

you where she is gone, Monsieur. Back to the Manoir, I think. She will bring me some soup before it is dark.'

'But she's not at the Manoir. Where would she have gone? Where would she look for it? Can it have run down to the meadow?' cried Graham.

'To the island? How could it think of such a thing? — when Mademoiselle has always carried it? And in this storm!'

'And it could not get to the meadow. The bridge is under water,' the small boy volunteered suddenly.

'Under water? How do you know that?' his mother questioned.

'I went down to look this afternoon. The stream was almost level with it then. And I went to the bottom of the road and saw the dyke. All the people from Buissac were there. The water was running over the top and through the stones.'

'Running over the dyke? — And why did you not tell me?'

'Mademoiselle Marthe and Monsieur Trumier were there too, and they told me to say nothing, lest it should trouble you. But you would rather know that the kid could not be on the meadow,' said the boy with conviction.

'Pray Heaven the dyke does not give way!' the woman exclaimed. 'It is the best grazing land in the *commune* and we all remember the flood of fifteen years ago. Not only were six fine cows drowned, but the land was spoiled for two whole seasons. Some people

say it has never been so good since; the river did it so much damage.'

Graham took out some coins and laid them on the table, muttering his thanks. He closed the door behind him and stood among the vineyards. The wind had dropped a little, but the rain fell still more resolutely and the evening was now as dark as the rain. Where was she? She could not have gone down the cliff to the meadow. Might she not again be at the bottom of the road watching the menaced dyke?

Suddenly he saw below him, black, tottering, half blotted out by the rain, the figure of Madame de Lamouderie. She was climbing the cliff-side, inch by inch, stopping to breathe at every three steps. He saw her against the sky, as he had first seen her; but this was a livid sky, and she was below, not above him. As he stood there, looking down upon her, she lifted the grey disk of her face and saw him, and she stopped short as if a bullet had gone through her heart.

A horrible presage traversed Graham's mind as he saw that arrest. Just so would a criminal stop, seeing suddenly before him the armed and inescapable forces of the law. No fear that he had ever known equalled the fear he felt as he recognized in that instant the embodied evil before him.

He walked slowly down the path until he had come close to her, and as he thus advanced upon her he did not move his eyes from her fixed and staring face. Then, standing still before her, he said: 'Where is Marthe?'

Madame de Lamouderie made no reply. She continued to stare at him, with her mouth twisted to one side.

'Where is she? I've come to find her,' said Graham.

Madame de Lamouderie had evidently been exposed to the elements for a considerable time. The black laces of her hat-brim were beaten down about her neck. Rain streamed from her arms and shoulders; it seemed to pass through her, and her skirts were deep in mud and clung closely to her knees.

She made an effort to speak at last; but only a croaking sound issued from her throat.

'Why are you out here in this storm? What's brought you out?' Graham demanded, mastering his mounting fury.

'I have come to look for her,' said the old lady in a dry, rattling voice.

'Come to look for her! When did you miss her, then? You must have gone before she did.'

The old lady shook her head. 'No; no; — you are mistaken. You do not understand. It was when I did not find her that I came to look. She is nowhere to be found. Nowhere,' said the old lady, gazing all round her and then back at him with gaunt eyes.

Graham stood there, piercing her with his menacing stare.

'I want her,' the old lady went on, and her voice now found the tremolo of pathos and ill-usage. 'I cannot live when she is not beside me. She is the one person in the world who cares for me.'

'That may well be so. That's very likely, I think,' said Graham with unstudied cruelty. But he stood and pondered. There was always the half truth in her lie. Marthe was the one person in the world who cared for her and it was very probable that, even while she hated her, Madame de Lamouderie wanted her. Was it just possible that she had missed her and come out to seek her? And as he stood in this uncertainty, the old lady watched, watched him; — in what was almost a frenzy of fear and caution; — as a lion-tamer in a cage might watch the lion upon whom his wiles have failed to act. And as he remained silent, gazing down at the rain-swept hillside, she found a further note: 'I am very weary,' she murmured. 'I am dead with weariness.' A distorted smile twisted her mouth still further. 'Will you not lend me your arm,' she murmured, 'to reach the house again? Then we can take counsel of Joseph.'

'No; I'll do nothing for you; nothing, do you hear?' Graham muttered. 'Until I find her. Stay here, or crawl back home by yourself — as you please; — you'll get no help from me. There's something about you; — there's a lie; — a horror —' He stopped.

From far below them, through the rushing of the rain, a sound came to his ear. Faint; thin; intermittent. The bleating of a young animal in distress. 'Good God!' he cried. 'She's down on the island!'

The old lady sprang at him and seized his arm. 'No! No!' she cried. 'You are mad! — On the island? — You are mad! It is already under water! I have been down to look. The dyke is down! — The kid is

drowned! — Listen! Listen! — to one who loves you! It was for your sake — for the sake of your wife that I lied to you! — Yes! Yes! I have lied! So that you should not go to her! — so that you should not break your young wife's heart! — Oh, listen! — Stay one moment! — She is at the Manoir! — She is hidden in the Manoir! — So that you should not find her! — She begged me to keep her secret! She is in deadly fear of you!'

Turned away from her, his hand laid on her shoulder to force her from him, he had paused to hear what she might still bring forth; but now, again, came the sharp, the faltering bleat; unmistakable. The kid was on the island and Marthe was with it.

As he sprang down the path he dragged Madame de Lamouderie with him. She was clinging to his arm, clawing at his coat; her feet slipped and beat on the uneven path as she grappled with him. But one backward blow of his arm freed him at last. He heard her fall roughly on the stones, and as he bounded forward her wailing cry followed him — half curse, half lamentation: 'Insensate! Mad! Cruel! You will drown! You will die! The dyke is down! You will not find her!'

CHAPTER XXXII

The Flood

THE bridge was already under water, though the handrail still emerged; his feet found the plank and he crossed on it. Films and fans of water were sliding over the meadow and he heard the deep rush of the streams on either side; but as he turned and ran, on higher ground, round the promontory, he was hardly ankle-deep in water. The dyke was not yet down. The cabin was not far: not more than a quarter of a mile. If the plank was too deep by the time they got back to the bridge, they could pull themselves across by the hand-rail. Even if they had to throw themselves into the stream, the current might carry them against the cliff. They could climb up and be saved. On one hand as he ran he saw the shadowy ranks of the poplars, swaying against the wind; on the other, looming above him, was the cliff. The memory of all his old terrors was in his mind, but a fiercer fear raced beside him. Should he outstrip the fall of the dyke? Even as he ran he could feel that the confluent streams met in mounting waves over his feet.

Suddenly his ankle turned under him in a sickening twist and wrench. He fell heavily on his hands and knees over a hidden obstacle, and as he raised himself he ground his teeth with fury, for the foot was sprained, or broken. Forcing it to bear his weight, he splashed

forward, catching at his breath, the anguish bringing a cold sweat to his brow, and he saw at last before him the cabin, set small and low between the heights; visionary no longer; its sinister secret all displayed; the place appointed for their death, unless they could outstrip the flood. And, loud and piteous now, came once more the cry of the kid.

He reached the cabin and dragged himself round to the door, holding by the wall. The door was on the further side, and there, bending to the latch, was Marthe. She was picking, pulling, fiercely yet accurately, at a knot tied with wet rope to a padlock across it. She wore the small black shawl tied under her chin and the black raincoat in which he had first seen her. Graham laid his hands upon her shoulders.

She started back, and then stood still under his hands. In the gaze they exchanged her eyes measured the full meaning of his presence; yet it might have been the kid only she was thinking of as she said: 'It is tied too tight. I have no knife. I cannot open it.'

Without a word, leaning against the cabin wall, Graham took out his knife and sawed at the tough, wet rope.

'Did you hear the kid cry? In all this storm? Is that how you found me?' Marthe went on. And not pausing for a reply: 'She carried it down. She took it from its place in the shed and carried it down. I met her. She told me it was here. She did not even trouble to lie to me. She did not even pretend that it had run away; — she was so sure that I was to die. She tied

the rope; so that I should take too long. She risked her life to do it. She is mad.'

'Yes. That was what she did. I met her. She lied to me. To the last she tried to keep me from you. But we've foiled her, this time; — we've foiled her at last,' muttered Graham, bending over the knot. Terror and joy inundated his soul. And again it was as if he blessed Madame de Lamouderie who brought them thus together.

The rope snapped. Inside the hut the kid was cowering. Marthe lifted it, murmuring, 'My poor little one, you shall not be left to die.'

'We shall all die, unless we make haste. Give me the kid. And run. Run to the bridge. I'm following.' He leaned against the cabin and put out his hands for the kid, while he felt the water lap about their feet.

But she was standing still. Her white face scanned him. 'What is the matter? Why do you not come, too?'

'I am coming. Give me the kid.' He forced himself forward on the broken foot.

'You have injured yourself. You are in great pain. You cannot walk,' said Marthe.

'I've hurt my foot, a little. It is nothing. I can get along — more slowly. In God's name, give me the beast and go!' cried Graham in a voice of sudden fury. 'I promise to you to save it — and myself — if I can.'

'You think that I will leave you? You cannot think it. Take my arm,' said Marthe. 'Lean on me.'

As she spoke a distant tumult shook the air. Muffled yet portentous, it seemed to drop down upon them from the promontory as the echo of the catastrophe was beaten against the rock. And a strange stillness followed it. As though the very wind and rain had paused to listen.

'The dyke is down,' said Marthe.

'Run! Run! In God's name run! There is time yet!' cried Graham. 'The river will take five minutes to reach you! You can reach the bridge in five minutes!'

She had turned her head to listen; now she looked back at him. 'There is no time. And you cannot think that I would leave you. There is no time. We must climb onto the roof,' said Marthe. 'Wait. Hold the kid.'

She put the kid in his arms and ran inside the cabin and returned pulling through the water a heavy trestle. She pushed it against the wall of the cabin, not pausing to dispute when he made her mount first. She took the kid from him and helped him to struggle up beside her. The cabin stood some six feet high. It was solidly built. 'The river may not rise to this level,' said Graham.

'Yes. It will,' said Marthe. 'I was a child in the last great flood. It was less terrible than this. When the dyke went down, the river rose far above this height. But wait. It may not be so sudden. The dyke may give way by degrees. I do not think that all has fallen yet.'

They saw, as she spoke, that the obscurity before

them shaped itself into an advancing, a darker obscurity. It came with a sinister stillness, softly, swiftly, and spread about them. The river finding its ancient bed once more; rippling and gliding deeply to the poplar groves; to the cliff; as distant now and as inaccessible as the island. The timbers of the cabin groaned and trembled as they felt the impact. But they still held, and the river paused a foot below the cabin roof.

'Can you swim?' asked Graham, scanning the waters.

'No.'

'Nor can I. Yet' — still he looked about him — 'one might keep afloat. You could put your hand on my shoulder. The current might carry us down against the cliff —'

'To dash us against it? — You with your broken foot? We could not keep afloat. Why waste our last moments in a vain struggle?' said Marthe. She spoke almost with a tender mockery.

He looked back at her. 'Then we are to die together, Marthe,' he said.

She had drawn her shawl down about her shoulders and folded the kid in it against her side. The form of her face seemed to float upon the darkness; he saw only her gaze and that a starry ecstasy breathed from her. 'Yes. Together,' she said. 'Are you not glad, too?'

He made no reply. He put his arms around her and laid his head, at last, upon her breast. So the dream came true. That had been her secret from the first. It was because she did not belong to life, and to the earth,

that he had sought her. She was the light that trembled through all living; but she did not belong to life. It belonged to her; as the earth belongs to the sky. It was so clear to him now that she could not have lived and belonged to him; that he possessed her now only because she was to die. 'Eurydice,' he murmured.

She smiled, as if she understood, though he was almost unaware that he called her by the name of his dreams, and, held in his arms, she bent her head so that she could look into his eyes. And she began to speak to him, at last; swiftly, unhesitatingly, with a passionate quiet and impetuosity; like that of the river rushing over the broken barrier; with an intimacy profound and unfaltering that years of life together could hardly have made more complete.

'I may tell you now how much I love you. I have loved you from the beginning; from the first moment that I saw you; — though at first I thought it fear. It was as if I had been waiting for you always; as if my roots in the dark had been seeking you; listening for you. When I saw you my life ran into yours. I could do nothing to help myself; I could be silent; but I could not help myself; it was like a river running into the sea. And Jill was there, beautiful to me as no one in my life had been beautiful. It seemed to me that you were the darkness that pursued me, and she the light: — I hid myself in her so that you should not find me. Yet my thoughts were full of you always. It was of you I was thinking when you came that night; and when I saw you there I did not think of Jill at all; —

only of you, and of my gladness — my terrible gladness, that you had come. All yesterday I wandered, and it seemed to me that I could not live when you were gone. Oh, say that you are glad, too. Say that you are glad to die with me as I am glad to die with you.'

'All I know is that I am with you,' Graham muttered. Her passion, her beauty dazed him. She was like a flame within his arms. 'I am glad because I have you. That is all I need.'

Silent, with closed eyes, they kissed each other, again and again, passionately; and as they clung together the sound of the dull, portentous uproar smote again upon their ears.

But those longed-for kisses, in all their tragic sweetness, seemed now irrelevant. He was nearer her when he could look at her than when he kissed her. Let him sink once more into those radiant eyes. Let him lose himself. For the cabin again trembled beneath them; the water had risen nearly to the roof; he was seeing, in dark flashes, the swiftly approaching death. How would it be at the end? Could they keep this rapture fast? — hold closely to each other, while they fought the cold, insensate element that would batter at lips and nostrils? How horrible to have to fight death even while one prayed for its deliverance! And, looking into her starry eyes, thinking that this loveliness must die in torment, Graham groaned aloud.

As if she guessed his thoughts she smiled at him and, with a gesture maternal in its tenderness, she drew his

head to hers, pressing it against her cold, wet cheek. 'Do you remember, in the garden yesterday?' she said. 'When you asked me to love you, I was silent. Shall I tell you why I was silent all that time? It was like an hallucination that came into my mind. A little boy; our child. If I loved you as you asked there might be a child to make the meaning of my life — even after you had left me. I seemed to see him running up the garden path before us there; very young; with ruffled hair, and eyes like yours. Only his were not lonely eyes; but happy, for he was with his mother. It was like an hallucination. — I saw him turn his face to smile at us. And then I saw that it must never be. He would have been a disinherited child; like me. An outcast. It was only a dream. I had not to struggle. But while it lasted it kept me silent.'

'My angel! My saint!' Graham whispered.

She had kept her face pressed close to his while she told her dream and she was silent for a moment while the water lapped up to their feet. 'No; not an angel,' she said then. 'Not a saint. Saints do not long for human love as I have longed. I have had desires as wild, as desperate, as those of any woman. You must know me as I am. Not a saint. But it has not all been that. I have had other longings.' She drew from him to look at him again. The rain streamed like tears over her face. It was as if already the dividing waters were veiling her from him. Yet light came to him from her. 'Do you believe in God?' she said. 'Can you feel, before we die, that you believe in God?'

'I can believe in God when you are there,' said Graham.

'I believe in Him even when you are not there,' said Marthe. 'Always, at great moments, the sense of a presence has come to me. When my mother killed my father and I found them; when I held her in her frenzies at night; when she died and left me. I feel it bless us now.'

Graham was trembling with grief and pain and adoration. The sense of light was about him, and while he gazed into her eyes he felt himself lifted and sustained on a strength infinitely transcending his own. Marthe's strength? God's strength? What did that matter? Was not the heart of the mystery this flame that she revealed to him in whose light he might find it bliss to die? And as he gazed at it, at that moment, he saw it fall from her face. He felt a shock go through her and heard a far off cry.

The watery wastes were empty. The promontory cut its vast bulk across the sky, shutting out Buissac; but, borne on the wind, beaten by the rain, wavering as a foam-bell wavers on swirling water, the cry had reached them, and he drew away to listen. And Marthe, too, turned her face away and looked towards Buissac.

And in that silent, listening moment Graham felt a vast menace, an abyss of emptiness, poised above them, opening beneath them, and remembered all his terrors. It was as if in that moment Marthe left him. It was the voice of life calling out to them and as she heard it her flame went out.

Again it came, and round the promontory they saw a light appear, wavering like the cry, floating in the darkness, rising and falling as if it pulsed and breathed.

'No; no; no,' he heard Marthe say — or thought he heard her say. The words were hardly a whisper and her head was turned away from him.

Graham sprang to his feet, steadying himself by a hand laid on her shoulder. 'Jill! Jill! Jill!' he shouted. Already he could see the boat; the lantern at the bows; the two forms straining at the oars in the racing current. And Jill answered him, crying: 'Marthe! Dick!'

He looked down at Marthe. She sat below him still, her face turned towards the boat, the kid, wrapped in the shawl, held closely to her side. 'We're to live, Marthe,' he said. 'She's come to save us. Nothing can part us now.'

She did not look up at him. She made him no reply. The water lapped up about her feet.

'Come,' he said harshly. 'Stand beside me. Help me. I can't be saved unless I lean on you. You've got to live; — for me.'

It was life Jill brought them; but what was this dark dismay lapping at his soul?

Marthe rose to her knees and he took her hand and pulled her up beside him, grasping her shoulder, fastening her to his side. Let him hold her close. Let him feel her there, against his heart. Life might be the looming menace; but he wanted Marthe.

And she was obedient. She stood steadying him, sustaining them both, for the water was sweeping now

strongly over their feet and without her he could not have held himself upright. The boat was near them and the lantern illuminated the faces of the rescuers; a man's face, wary, resolute; Jill's face, golden in the light, exhausted, joyful.

'*Attrappez!*' called the man. He half rose, crouched and poised himself, flinging a coiled rope. Graham fell to his knees to catch it. He passed it round a corner of the cabin roof, looped it over a projecting beam and over one arm, holding Marthe round the knees with the other.

The boat shot down the stream, while the rowers struggled at the oars, and, as the rope drew taut, turned in the current with a violent jar, then slid, docile, against the roof; and, as they all drew thus near together, Jill, for one moment, raised her eyes upon the two who stood there in a deep glance of love and triumph.

'*Gare à vous!*' cried the man. 'Keep clear of the boat. Get in carefully.'

'Put your hand on my arm,' said Graham. 'Then on his. Quickly. Quickly.'

'I cannot with the kid,' said Marthe in a low voice. 'Take it. Put it in first.'

He controlled a rage of terror and impatience that rose in him, but she had unwrapped the kid and he took it from her.

The terrified little creature struggled in his arms and he tottered and nearly fell, saving himself by a clutch at the side of the boat. Jill held hard at her oars; the

boat was righted; the kid was safe. He had tossed it in and turned again to Marthe.

She was not there.

'Marthe!' he cried, looking wildly round him.

She was not there.

'She has fallen!' shouted the boatman. 'She has gone under the boat! — Down the current! — Look!'

Jill shipped her oars and snatched the lantern from its place and held it up. 'Marthe!' she cried. 'Marthe!' and she turned the lantern on the black water, on the poplar groves, on the cliff, round on every side, while the vacant beams stretched far, far into the desolate night.

'Where is she? Let me go to her!' Graham was crying in a nightmare voice; for the boatman had seized him by the arm, and Jill had seized him. 'Let me go to her!' he cried, struggling fiercely. But they dragged him in.

'Row! Row! Row!' said Jill.

And the man rowed down under the cliff-side where the current flowed so swiftly and Jill crouched with the lantern and Graham lay insensible at the bottom of the boat.

There was no face upon the water. Marthe was not there. She had slipped — or fallen — or been swept away. The river had taken her. She was gone.

EPILOGUE

ALL Buissac, on a radiant afternoon, was gathered high above the river on the promontory road. It was at the spot where Jill Graham, two years before, had leaned on the parapet to look out over the plains and down at the island, and the scene wore again its spring-time vesture. The plains melted in azure undulations to the sky; the river flowed in silver majesty; the island was tranquil, all the ravages of the great flood mantled with compassionate green; and among the poplar groves three white cows moved, quietly grazing. Only one change there was; the unwonted stillness on the opposite shore. No women knelt at the river's edge to wash and no men fished. The sounds of the countryside had gathered themselves into one dense hive of ardent humming on the promontory road, where a memorial tablet, set into the cliff above it, was to be unveiled. It was a great day for Buissac; a day such as history is made of, on which the roots of legend flower; and since Marthe Ludérac's death, legends had rooted themselves. The soil of life in such a remote, unsophisticated community is propitious to them, and the tragic circumstances of her death, the grief that had attended it, had suddenly lifted and enshrined her shadowy, unapprehended figure.

For weeks after the catastrophe, Graham had lain at the Ecu d'Or, his life and his reason in danger, and

Jill, pale and silent, had passed among the people, and wherever she was seen, with her stricken face, Marthe Ludérac was remembered. She had visited the curé when the body was recovered and made all arrangements for the funeral; she sat with the mayor and supervised the disposal of Marthe's small fortune. She was at the Manoir day and night, tending the old woman desperately dying there. Her authority was undisputed. A sense of mysterious significance and grief surrounded the dead girl with an aura. Then, when at last Graham could travel, he and she had gone, and for two years Buissac heard no more of them. But Marthe Ludérac was not forgotten. Her legend grew quietly, insistently, as lilies-of-the-valley grow underground; running ever further and throwing up at each new season fresh shoots and flowers. Excitement, elation, was felt in Buissac when it was known that Madame Graham had returned to erect a monument to her; but no surprise. She was already a presence among them.

In the cemetery, half a mile below, there were now three graves under the chestnut branches. A solitary wreath of daffodils had been laid on Madame de Lamouderie's; but Marthe Ludérac's was heaped with tinsel flowers, bead wreaths, and sacred ornaments and looked at last in keeping, it was felt, with the rest of the fine Buissac necropolis. Madame Michon might have pronounced it almost *coquet* when, with the others, she came to-day to lay upon it her own splendid offering, bristling with porcelain scrolls and inscriptions.

The Michons expected great things from this accession of fame to Buissac. They were enlarging the Ecu d'Or, and Madame Michon, sitting on a campstool in the shade of a large black umbrella, was graciously ready to give information to those who crowded round her. Madame Graham was staying at the Ecu d'Or, *bien entendu.* She was to unveil the monument and might now be expected to appear at any moment. *Ce pauvre* Monsieur Graham could not be with them. He had not yet recovered, Madame Michon gathered, from the effects of the terrible night when he and Madame had seen their beloved friend swept away before their eyes. But he was, at last, beginning to paint again. One saw the gladness in Madame's face when she spoke of it, — ah, she had suffered, the poor young lady; she was changed; aged. But still as charming as ever; *gentille et avenante;* full of thought for all her old friends. She was sending the little Germaine to a good school and Madame Jeannin had cause to bless her. But then — had it not been for Blaise Jeannin, Monsieur Graham would have perished with Mademoiselle Ludérac.

Blaise, indeed, in Sunday best, a watch-chain across his waistcoat, was a centre of interest. Many people here to-day had not seen him before and pressed round him as he recited, with the assurance of old custom, his reminiscences. He had climbed down the cliff to this very spot when his mother, on that night of disaster, had told him to follow the *Monsieur anglais* and help him in his search for the kid, and had seen Gra-

ham running along the flooded island. A passing motor had picked him up and brought him to the Ecu d'Or, where cries and lamentations had greeted the dreadful news he had to tell. He could recall it all. Madame Graham saying she must find a boat; Monsieur Michon telling her that it would be an act of madness to attempt to cross the broken dyke; Monsieur Prosper coming forward and asserting that he could take her. Blaise had remained at the Ecu d'Or, dozing before the fire until, hours later, Monsieur Graham had been carried in, unconscious. He had started forward then and cried: '*Et mon biquet?*' And Monsieur Prosper had said: '*Ton biquet? — Eh bien, elle est morte pour ton biquet, cette pauvre demoiselle.*' His *biquet* still remained for Blaise the central figure of the tragedy, and he could not now regret that his mother had accepted the money and he the watch; for here the watch still was and the kid would long ago have been eaten. Madame Graham had come to see them that morning and had told him that it was now a mother.

Madame Jeannin, her pale face shining with excitement, talked with an astonishing volubility. She was a very fount of tradition, for had she not known Mademoiselle Ludérac from her childhood? She could tell them what her favourite dishes had been and how she was not always sad at all but would laugh and make jokes while they did the housework together. It was with Madame Jeannin and her old grandmother that Madame de Lamouderie had taken refuge when terrible misfortunes had befallen her. Ah, yes, she was a

veritable countess, *pour sûr*, and of a great family. *La vieille bonne maman* had been a *nourrice* in her Paris house. '*On y mangeait de bons morceaux, je vous en réponds*,' said Madame Jeannin. But how they could have gone on caring for her she did not know, since all money from Paris ceased at last to come, and well did she remember the day when Mademoiselle came to their cottage and took the poor old lady to live with her — Ah, that was a devotion! When Mademoiselle was not with her, Madame la comtesse pined. She had died of grief, and it had broken one's heart to hear her moaning day and night: 'Marthe; — Marthe; — Marthe.' Only when Madame Graham sat beside her and held her hand would she be still, and in her last moments she had cried out upon Marthe Ludérac's name, as if upon a saint's, and had begged for her intercession with *le bon Dieu*.

There were many, also, who remembered the child leading her mother in the woods and one or two who said that they had witnessed the scene of the stoning. She had thrown herself before her mother and had looked like a martyr; with great courageous eyes and blood upon her forehead. The story of the young *permissionnaire* was told; Marthe had become a heroine of the great war; and people passing the Manoir at night had heard the angelic notes of her harp and now recalled the supernatural awe that had fallen upon them. One woman said that she had seen Marthe Ludérac in the forest at evening carrying a succoured animal, and that there had been an aura about her

head. So the hive hummed on, storing its legendary honey.

But one figure stood apart from all the dense and eager crowd; bereft, morose, uncommunicating, an old blind dog beside him. No one spoke to Monsieur Trumier, though glances were turned on him as he stood near the veiled monument, holding Médor by a cord.

He had let the Manoir to a family from Bordeaux and lived in Buissac near his niece's family. He made no friends; he spoke to no one, occupying himself with his niece's children and Mademoiselle Ludérac's decrepit animals. He was often to be seen in the cemetery, tending her grave, or in the woods where she had walked; and sometimes he and Médor wandered for hours on the island below, where she had lost her life. A slight feeling of superstitious awe surrounded him and it was whispered among the Buissac children that whereas Mademoiselle Ludérac blessed you if you were good to animals, Monsieur Trumier, if you were cruel, could lay a malediction upon you.

When Jill's little open car appeared at last at the turning of the road, it had to come slowly, so dense had grown the crowd. People stood on the parapet of the wall to look over the heads of others and boys had climbed up into the wayside poplars and clung there to the branches. Jill was pale as she looked at them all, opening a way for her. She had not expected such a concourse.

Sitting beside her were *Monsieur le curé* and *Mon-*

sieur le maire, a marvellous proximity indeed in the eyes of Buissac, and as the three were seen it was felt, more deeply perhaps than at any other time, that Madame Graham was a remarkable woman.

She was grave and very pale; but she was not wearing black; her clothes were the girlish country clothes they had always seen her wear, and when she got out and made her way among them, she paused to shake hands with Monsieur Prosper, with Blaise, with Madame Jeannin. Then she went to stand beside Monsieur Trumier, stooping to caress the head of the old dog before she looked up at him. It was seen that though she and Monsieur Trumier looked at each other, they did not speak at all.

Monsieur le curé and *Monsieur le maire* then took their places before the crowd.

Monsieur le curé, who was very red, told them of the filial virtues of the dead girl. She had been, he said, a very perfect example to them all, in that respect. They would all remember how terrible was the cloud of guilt that had rested upon her home and with what patience and fortitude she had tended her mother until her death, '*munie*' said the *curé*, with something of doggedness in his tone, '*des sacrements de l'église.*' He ended with an allusion to *la sainte Vierge* and *sainte Anne* that was not felt to have much relevance; and indeed the *curé* evidently felt so himself, for he came to an end abruptly and stepped back to make place for the *maire*.

Monsieur le maire spoke at much greater length and

in a florid voice. He spoke of France, its glories and attractions, and of the charming young English couple who had come among them. They had loved Buissac from the first; and who would not love Buissac that knew it? And who would not love France, the chivalrous, humanitarian nation? She was a torch to all the peoples, said *Monsieur le maire* — striking his chest and flinging up his short, fat arm — and, as always, she led the way towards the glorious eras of liberty and progress that opened before the new generations. How France was appreciated, and in the person of a humble and unfortunate young citizen, the magnificent work of art, now to be unveiled before them by its generous donor, attested. *Monsieur le curé* had spoken to them of Mademoiselle Ludérac's private virtues; he had to remind them of her acts of courageous patriotism. She had succoured French soldiers during the war. She had taken them in and given them food and shelter, poor and unprotected as she was. Her virtues had been French virtues; courage, patriotism, magnanimity; and for ages to come none of those who passed along this road would fail to honour France in honouring her. So, with a quivering voice, *Monsieur le maire* ended, and no one who saw Madame Graham leaning back against the cliff, with folded arms and downcast eyes, would have suspected that she controlled more than once a bitter inclination to smile.

But though Jill controlled a smile, *Monsieur le curé* and *Monsieur le maire* had done what she had intended they should do. The Church and the State had recog-

nized Marthe Ludérac. Her turn had come. She stepped forward and withdrew the veil.

The tablet, set flatly in the grey limestone, might almost have grown by natural agencies of time and weather from the cliff, so simple, so elemental was its design. The life-size profile, carved in low relief, seemed to breathe from the rock; but with another breath than that of life. Had the spirit of the dead girl yearned for a reincarnation in her loved country, her longing might thus have found fulfilment; for this strange head, bent forward as if to gaze down at the great river and out over the plains, was like an emanation of the dreaming soul, so remembering past beauty that it had emerged through the rock — and through the minds of those who had loved her — to look and listen for ever to the sights and sounds that had accompanied its pilgrimage on earth. It looked; it listened; but what was the meaning of the beauty that it saw, the secret melody it heard?

Above it, carved in the framing stone, an inscription ran: 'Marthe Ludérac: — She had compassion on all that suffers and lost her life, below this spot, while rescuing a kid from the flood.'

Beneath was a drinking-fountain, and carved round it, processionally, a file of animals, led by an archaic girlish figure carrying a kid.

The crowd gazed, silently, and in an unbroken silence listened to Jill's brief words. She told them that her husband had drawn Marthe Ludérac's head from memory and that a friend of theirs, a young French

sculptor, had carved it and the fountain from his designs.

'Very few people knew her,' said Jill, and her voice, steady till now, trembled a little. 'She was very lonely. Her life was very sad. But I think it would make her happy if she could see us all here to-day and know that we all loved her, for her heart was full of love. And it would make her happy to think that because of her everyone in Buissac was kind to animals. She was a great person; though only one or two ever saw her greatness. They will never forget her; and you, I know, will not forget her; but long after we are dead, this memorial will tell people that she lived here and was loved.'

There was nothing more that she could do. She and Dick were together, as Marthe had meant, in leaving them, that they should be; and perhaps, because of Marthe, people in Buissac would be kinder to animals; as she herself would be. There would be less cruelty in the world, because of Marthe. That was all. And she must leave her now, for ever.

She stood in silence, with the rest, gazing up at the dear face; so remote; as remote as a star; yet as near as the light of the star shining upon one.

And little whispers came to her from the crowd as all drew near to look more closely at the memorial.

'See; — it is as if the wind were blowing back her hair.'

'She is so grave, yet she seems about to smile.'

'It is a dead face,' said one woman, for, as they looked, a sense of awe crept over them. But her companion said: 'No; it is a face in paradise.'

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